

Overachiever (Rewriting)

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Summary: If you saw me on the street, you would think I was normal. If you saw me in my school, you'd know I was the teacher's pet, the overachiever. If you saw me in my house, you'd know that my dad hits me and that I cover the bruises with long sleeves and bright smiles, smiles that happy, ordinary children seem likely to have. But I wouldn't know, would I? Child abuse. Rewritten version.

1. Speechless and Shaken

Chapter 1: Speechless and Shaken

****Hi! This is my new rewritten version of Overachiever! I'm sorry I didn't warn anybody...I tried... *hysterical sobbing*****

****This is my best attempt at a good version of the story. I hope it lives up to everybody's expectations!****

****Warnings: Rated T for child abuse, low self-esteem, bullying, dark thoughts, possible suicidal thoughts, possible self-injury or self-injurious behavior aaaaaand angst. This is set back when Hiccup is 10, right after his mother died.****

* * *

><p>I guess I was young. I frowned to myself as I plugged up the microwave, my thoughts far from what my hands were doing. I checked to make sure the plug was all the way in. It was.<p>

I mean, I was ten years old. That wasn't that bad, right?

I stretched a little as I walked over to the pantry, opening the doors. I'd thought we had a few cans of soup in there, the last time I'd checked, but they weren't anymore.

I sighed, eyes scanning the shelves for something different.

My mind returned to the conversation that I'd overheard Gobber having with a few other family members.

"He's so young," Gobber had said drearily, sadly, like he was upset for me. There were enough people who sounded upset for me, I thought as I lowered my gaze, absently looking at the lower shelves, even though I knew there were only plastic dishes.

I might have been a little young, but there had been too many people looking over at me with tears welling up in their eyes for my taste.

Of course, I completely understood why that had beenâ€¦

I tried to push the thoughts away, latching onto the debate about what age made a person be considered young.

Eventually, my negative thoughts planted themselves firmly in my mind and refused to leave until I at least looked at them.

I reluctantly acknowledged their existence and another one sneaked in while my mind was busy with the others.

I wondered, for a brief, scary moment, where my dad had gone. He had disappeared two days ago and he hadn't come back. I had been alone since then.

I had slept with all the lights on for these two nights and I was still a little too scared to really go fully to sleep. I was running on such little rest that I thought as I shut the pantry doors that I might just sleep for a day or so. I hadn't been in to school since everything that had happened, either, not sinceâ€¦

I sighed and closed my eyes tightly. I didn't want to think of her. I wouldn't let myself, I decided. I slammed the pantry doors shut and walked instead to the fridge. I grabbed at the door and pulled firmly, yanking, really and it came loose with ease.

The light flickered on and I surveyed my options; there really was nothing there. I wasn't that hungry, but routine was comforting. Routine meant peace. Routine reminded me of Mom, but not in a painful way; it was a nice way.

Gobber was planning to drop by to check on us in a few days; he'd told me so himself when he'd called. The way he spoke indicated that he thought my dad was there, but I just kept repeating that he was in the middle of stuff and couldn't talk.

I didn't know why, but I didn't want people to know that I was alone here right now.

I shut the fridge and opened the freezer instead, pulling out a box of frozen chicken nuggets and another one of fries.

I decided that this would be my dinner and that I would make a little extra, in case Dad came home tonight. I knew how to operate the microwave â€" I thought. I heated the fries and the chicken nuggets, sitting down at the table and studying the tabletop. My thoughts drifted away from the humming microwave and settled instead on how

crazily surreal everything had been these past few daysâ€|

I slowly breathed in and out as I thought of it, feeling a lump start building up in my throat. I didn't want to cry anymore, considering how many tears I'd been shedding, on and off, for the past two days, but they wouldn't stop coming.

The numbness always came before the tears and I welcomed it. It allowed me to get up and do something, shove my mind away from it. Then the tears would come and then, after awhile, the numbness would take over again and I'd insist that this couldn't really be happening. The peace I found was temporary and fickle, but at least it was some small, twisted form of it.

The front door opened just as the microwave dinged loudly. I rose from my chair, forcing myself back into the numb state. I had never seen my dad cry before everything that had happened and I didn't want to see it happening again.

My back was to him when he entered the kitchen, his footsteps on the wooden floor unnaturally loud in the silence. I didn't look at him as I drew the plate of fries and chicken nuggets from the microwave. "I made dinner," I said quietly.

There was nothing but silence, but I was used to that â€" my dad had always been a man of few words. "I'm glad you're back," I gabbled, secretly relieved that he had returned.

"Nobody has seen you for a really long time," I continued, dividing the food on the plate between two saucers and grabbing a bottle of ketchup from the fridge. I set it down on the table between the two plates, pulled out a chair for myself and turned to him with a bit of a smile, just glad that he was here. "Gobber called, by the way." My smile dropped as I remembered why. "He said he was going to drop by later."

My dad stayed silent.

"Iâ€|I'm glad you're back," I mumbled, never taking my eyes off the table. Dad and I had never been very good at expressing our emotions â€" Mom had always been our go-between. I swallowed the lump of emotion when I thought of her and I studied the table even more intently as I wonderedâ€|

"Dad?" I whispered. I didn't wait for an answer; I plunged right on in with my question. "What do you thinkâ€|do you thinkâ€|do you think Mom's okay?"

I'd heard of 'heaven' before, but I wasn't terribly religious, and neither was the rest of my family; I only knew it because I'd heard others mention it from time to time and I knew that it was where people went when they died.

Dad's face twitched. "What?" his voice was suddenly cold and hard and I glanced nervously up at him. He was scowling at me.

"Do youâ€"

"What does it matter?" he said it slowly, like he was trying to pronounce each word clearly, which must've been hard for him, because

his voice was unnaturally slurred. "She is dead, Hiccup, and sheâ€¦" he took a breath, like he was trying to calm himself. "She's dead!" His voice was rising.

"It's not a matter of 'oh, I hope she's okay'. She's _dead_!"

I was gripping my fork a little too tightly. I didn't want to admit it, but he was scaring me. "Umâ€¦Dadâ€¦?" I began.

He did something frightening, then; he literally picked me up by the shoulders and shook me, yelling. "Is any of this making sense to you? She's dead! She's dead because of you!"

The words were terrible and ugly, but one glance at him and I knew he was trying to be. I felt myself shrinking down, I felt guilt attacking me from all sides and I don't know how I knew, but I knew I'd done something very, very wrong.

He smacked me then, smacked me so hard on the cheek that he sent me tumbling to the ground.

I sat there, staring at him for half a second, fingering my stinging, throbbing cheek. And then, without warning, I burst into tears.

"Stop it," my father said harshly from somewhere above me, but I was crying so hard by now that my vision was blurred and I couldn't see him. "Stop crying, boy."

He waited a few minutes and, when nothing changed, he sighed in disgust and walked right past me, leaving me sitting there, speechless and shaken.

2. A Lot Like Me

Chapter 2: A Lot Like Me

I don't know how good this chapter is. It feels mildly filler. I mean, obviously, it is, but it also does explain some things about him and his school and stuff, so...yeah. I think I'll leave it.

* * *

><p>I sat down at my desk, taking a breather as I listened to the whispers filling the classroom around me. My stomach growled as I seated myself, letting me know that I'd missed lunch and my body wasn't happy about it.<p>

I ignored it, hoping nobody else had heard. I was in luck â€" nobody seemed to be paying me very much attention, which was the way it always was in school.

Sometimes, I would get shoved in a locker or thrown into a Dumpster or a couple older guys would kick my butt, but most of the time, people avoided me.

I put my arms on my desk and rested my head on them, a wave of dizziness washing over me. My stomach growled a little bit again, but I took another deep breath. The dizziness didn't entirely vanish and

nothing could satisfy the hunger, which I couldn't really help, especially not on a day like today.

I slid my arms out from underneath my head, resting my forehead on the cool desktop. It made me feel a little better. I breathed in deep again as the door swung open and the teacher walked in, running a hand through his graying hair and going over to his desk. I lifted my head tiredly and watched him give a stern glare to those who were still talking and then he began to call roll.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this tired. I glanced down at my notebook to keep myself awake and saw the latest page I'd been working on. It was covered in X's, all written neatly in pencil, all on the lines of the pages. I quickly flipped back to what we'd studied last class, hoping nobody had seen that. The X's were a private thing and, besides that, they would just have been too hard to explain.

I took another slow breath, hoping fresh air would wake me up. I turned my attention back to the teacher, shoving the X's out of my mind. I was only allowed to stop thinking of that kind of thing when I had to listen to teachers. I knew my grades were already okay, but I also knew those little red letters at the tops of all my work pages meant absolutely nothing.

Nothing would change for me, no matter how many A's I got. I was still going to be the screw-up of Berk High, the freak no matter where I went.

"Hiccup Haddock?" I heard the teacher call.

I raised my head quickly and I heard a few people in the back begin whispering again.

"Having a nice nap, Haddock?" one of them called.

I flushed a little. So some people had noticed. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to be noticed or whether I wanted to blend into the background. Both options sounded equally terrible.

The teacher sent the boy who'd spoken a glare and I turned in my seat to look at who had spoken. Oh, of course â€" Snotlout Jorgenson, the school's worst, meanest bully. He told tall tales to try and get dates and, when he wasn't doing that, he was probably beating up and stealing from a couple five-year-olds.

And, for some reason, he seemed to love to taunt me.

See why being noticed is just as bad, if not worse, than being invisible?

I wouldn't have thought, when I moved to the small town of Berk two months ago, that I would find anybody who was interested in me â€" as a friend or boyfriend or anything, which was fine. It wasn't like I was looking for that. But what I was looking for even less was him. He used every chance he had to heckle me in the classes we had together â€" he'd corner me after school almost every week to punch me a couple times and call me stupid and useless and then he'd let me go.

It wasn't like I couldn't deal with him â€" in fact, I'd probably handled him better than the last kid he'd bullied like this had. From what I heard around the school, I gathered that kid had gone about two weeks like this and then had a mental breakdown. But I was used to dealing with bullies. I had quite enough of them in my own head.

"Hiccup Haddock?" the teacher repeated sternly, adjusting his spectacles.

"Here." I hastened to speak before Snotlout could.

He nodded and moved on down the list. I flipped through my notebook until I found the page of X's, neatly added two more to the growing page and dated the top, so I could remember what I'd done to earn the X's.

As my stomach growled a little and a few kids near me chuckled at the sound, I flushed and added a few more X's to the page.

The teacher had by now finished roll call and he cleared his throat, getting ready to teach. I quickly flicked the pages back, displaying the last page of notes I had on this class.

As he began to teach, I saw signs of inattention around the room â€" people fidgeting in their seats, others whispering to their neighbors, pulling out cell phones and passing notesâ€|

This was the way it was in my school and probably every single one; the students barely listened and the teachers barely cared, this one in particular. He tried to be stern, but the truth was, we all knew he was heading for retirement soon anyway and that he was only clinging on for a couple more years.

He noticed the signs of inattention the same way I did and raised his voice slightly, sending glares all around the room.

I hastily turned my attention back to him, snapping my notebook shut. I couldn't afford to think of anything else right now.

* * *

><p>I'd only been here two months and I'd already made the decision that art was my favorite class. Today was simple: we could draw anything we wanted, anything at all, just so long as it was drawn.<p>

The woman at the front of the room looked too young to be teaching. That had been my first thought when I'd stepped into her class. With her long brown hair, sunny smile and clothing that looked like she'd stepped out of a magazine, Ms. Delaney appeared, at first glance, to be one of the students.

Her high-heeled boots clacked on the floor as she walked around the room, making sure everybody knew what to do.

I picked up my pencil and rolled it in between my fingers. I loved drawing and painting, but I wasn't very good at it and I didn't have the money to buy myself the things I needed to draw every day. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Delaney had given us all sketchpads to use

for class assignments and for everyday use. I rarely ever used mine, because I rarely ever had the time, but in her class, it felt like time and space didn't matter. I had breathing room here. I had everything.

It didn't matter that I wasn't any good.

I stared at my pencil for a few minutes, trying to think of what I would draw. At first, I just penciled a few strokes, but with every brush of the pencil on the page, the drawing grew and grew until I realized exactly what it was and that I didn't like it one bit and that I was going to throw it away right now.

"Oh! Hiccup!" Ms. Delaney appeared at my side, smiling. She had invited us to call her by her name, Carol and she called her students by their first names as well. She often walked around the room, offering encouragement, but this was the first time she'd done it to me.

"Oh." I was about to slam my sketchbook shut when she glanced over and saw it.

"Oh, that is so powerful!" she congratulated. "May I see it?" Whenever she spoke, it was like she didn't know what declarative sentences were; she always added exclamation points to the end of everything she said.

She'd only seen a little bit, so she hadn't seen what crouched in the shadows at the forefront of my drawing. I really didn't want to make her ask questions, but I wasn't sure how to handle this.

"Umâ€¦"

"Oh, I just need proof you've done it, honey." She informed me.

I shrugged and mumbled, "It's nothing, it's just not very good."

She leaned over to look and drew a breath. "That is actually very good."

My face heated as I stared down at the drawing myself. The boy in the drawing crouched in the shadows, his head in his hands, his knees drawn up to his chest. The shadows were made up of hands that reached out to punch him, kick him, grab him, or jagged teeth with lips that spewed hateful words.

I hated the drawing. I kept looking down at it, feeling the scowl twisting my face, feeling an inexplicable and unreasonable desire to shove the book away from me, to rip this drawing into little pieces and to not ever let anybody see it again.

It took me a minute to realize that it wasn't the drawing â€" it was the boy I hated. And the reason for my hatred was because the boy in the drawing looked a lot like me.

3. Starving for Attention

Chapter 3: Starving for Attention

****Hi! This is my newest chapter! What do you think?***

****Also, guys, please. Stop telling me the first version was good enough. I appreciate it, I really do. But I personally felt that the first version needed improvement. It was good, yes - but it needed work as well.****

*** * ***

><p>Ms. Delaney cleared her throat. I looked up, sure I was going to see what I'd been drawing â€" but there was nothing but the scraping of desk chairs and thumping of books on books, bringing me sharply back to reality.<p>

"May I have your attention, please?" she asked. I noticed for the first time that she was wearing an electric blue headband in her brown hair with feathers at the top.

"Now, as you all know," Ms. Delaney began when everybody had looked up, "we're going to be holding an art competition, and the deadline is only a little while off! I'd like to see all of my students entering. Of course, I know some of you doubt you have the artistic talent â€" but I'd like to remind you that even the greatest doubted him or herself at one point. I see no reason as to why some members of my class should not be holding the grand prize. Entry forms are in the library!"

The bell rang loudly then and I began gathering up my things as the others filed out. I walked over to the trash can beside Ms. Delaney's desk while her back was turned and shredded the drawing of the boy in the shadows with the teeth and fists made of words tearing at him, beating him, punching him, kicking him.

I felt so much better as I ripped it in half.

"Don't do that," said a voice above me. I glanced up to see Ms. Delaney speaking. She was holding out a hand for me, but when I looked up, she withdrew her hand. "It's your drawing, of course," she said quickly, like she was forcing her nose out of my business. "But I was only saying â€" it's a wonderful drawing. You should keep it."

"No, thanks." I told her quietly. I ripped it in quarters and then in eighths. I hitched my backpack a little higher on my shoulder and stared down into the can for a second before resolutely resituating my pack and walking out the door.

*** * ***

><p>I splashed through the rain as I trudged back home, thinking of all the homework that I had to do. The algebra didn't look that hard, I reasoned with myself, resituating my backpack straps and the science should be easy. We had a test in science this week; if I didn't do well on itâ€" <p>

I sloshed through the rain, refusing to think on that. I would do well on the test. I would do well. I would show my dad that I was good. I would show my dad that I wasn't a screw-up. I could be good. I really could.

I reached my front door and unlocked it slowly, stepping inside. I

knew instantly that Dad had been there since I'd left that morning
" whether or not he was still there, however, was another
story.

When I walked to the kitchen, I saw that there were bottles and cans
and glasses spread out all over the table. As I began hauling them
off and dumping them in the sink, I realized it wasn't just my dad
who had been here " there were cigarette butts in some of the
glasses. Despite how much my dad drank and how often he dabbled in
other drugs, he had never been interested in smoking.

There was also what looked like the remnants of joints in a few of
the other glasses. I stared at it for a second and then I realized my
hand was shaking. I very carefully picked up the remains of the
joint, threw it in the garbage and put the glass in the sink.

The last time I'd dropped something and broken it, my dad had been so
angry

Now that the table was cleared of all residue, I checked the house
for Dad. I held my breath as I gently knocked on his closed bedroom
door. I was never supposed to enter his bedroom and if I did without
even knocking, I could only imagine the type of beating I'd get.

I could feel my heart pounding as I received no answer. I would have
preferred to reassure myself that Dad wasn't really there, but, just
like all the other times, I found I didn't quite have the courage to
look. I went back to the kitchen table and pretended I knew exactly
where my dad was and that I didn't hold my breath and flinch every
time the front door opened.

I opened my book to the correct page and began working on my algebra.
I was making pretty good headway and feeling pretty confident when
the dizziness washed over me again and the numbers blurred in front
of my eyes.

I took a deep breath. I had these sort of things before and I knew I
had to eat something now.

I stumbled to my feet and scanned the kitchen for a second, looking
for something quick and easy when my eyes landed on the box of Ritz
Crackers. I grabbed the box and dug out a small handful, setting them
beside my algebra book and beginning to work again.

It was when I stood to get a cup of water that I remembered; I
realized what I'd been doing and I stared down at the cracker in my
hand, one of the last few. I was still so hungry and I wanted to eat,
but I couldn't, not yet.

I took a long drink of water and when I reached the table again, I
slowly opened my math notebook, flicking through until I found the
page of X's I'd had in my notebook all week. I tore it out and
scanned it with my eyes, finding the date and checking it.
One"two"three"four"five

My stomach growled a little.

'Forget the stupid X's, Hiccup,' half of me wanted to say. 'Just eat
some more crackers, you're starving!'

'Shh,' I snapped back at myself. I turned back to the X's and continued counting.

â€|Sixâ€|sevenâ€|

I didn't even need to finish. I knew there were three more. I took a breath, walked over to the trash can and spat out the last bit of cracker I'd been chewing. I threw the other crackers away and put the box back where I'd found it.

I forced myself to focus on my work, trying to ignore the gnawing pain in my stomach. I knew it would be there tomorrow and tonight as I went to sleep. I could eat breakfast in the morning, at least â€" if I didn't earn any X's before I went to school, that is.

4. Sing Me to Sleep

Chapter 4: Sing Me to Sleep

****Well, I don't know where this chapter came from. Let's just say...well, actually, let's not say anything. I don't know, ok?

****Also, I'm not very good at writing abuse. It's like, I see how it is in my head and I see what I want it to be like, but it doesn't ever come out right.****

****By the way, the little "... " in the middle of the page indicates a flashback. Alright? He's still fourteen in the story, but it flashes back to earlier that night and also to when he was ten.**

>

* * *

><p>My mother used to tell me stories. She'd brush the stray hairs off my forehead and rock me to sleep with one of her fairy tales or sing me to sleep with one of her lullabies.<p>

I only remembered this as I sat in the living room, feeling tears threaten. I wanted to draw my knees up to my chest, but that would surely hurt too muchâ€|

I heard my dad's footsteps growing fainter and fainter as he retreated from the kitchen. His car hummed loudly as it roared to life. I heard the car door slamming and breathed a tiny sigh of relief. He was gone. For the night, my discipline was over.

â€|

Blood pouring into my eyes and temporarily blinding me as my head hit the wall behind me, hard. My dad's hands shoving me away from him, his face twisted with rage and hate as he screamed out his frustrations on meâ€|

â€|

I tried to stop the thoughts, because I didn't want to think about

them, but now that I'd begun, I wasn't sure if I could stop.

â€|

I closed my notebook, stretching a little and planning an early night when the driveway was suddenly alive with the sounds of a car pulling up, a metal door slamming, a key turning in the lock...

My heart thudded and I hastily zipped my backpack, trying to rush upstairsâ€|maybe if I got up there fast enough and he didn't see me, I wouldn't be punished tonight. Maybe I wouldn't deserve to be tonight.

The door creaked open just as my sneaker reached the bottommost stair. I hesitated, teetering on the edge, my backpack swinging out.

I wondered if he'd seen me, if he even realized he was at home. His eyes stared madly around, unfocused, fixing on me for a second before flickering away again, back somewhere else.

_I let out a breath. I didn't deserve punishment tonight. _

But before I could make it one step farther, my backpack swung again â€" and this time, the fraying string it hung by snapped, and it fell to the floor with a heavy thump.

I glanced down at it for a second before glancing up and realizing my father had seen it, too, so I waited there like a deer in the headlights for him to notice me.

His eyes lifted slowly from the backpack to me, fixing on me this time.

I tried to think, but panic clouded my brain. I tried to speak, but fear strangled my vocal cords. I stood there dumbly, staring at him.

"_Well?!" he snapped. "What are you waiting for?! Pick it up!" he gestured to the backpack lying at the foot of the stairs._

I turned to go retrieve it, but in my haste, I tripped over my own sneaker and fell to my knees beside the backpack.

"_Stand up, you klutz!" my dad bellowed._

My hands shook as I obeyed.

"_Pick up your bag," he ordered._

With fumbling fingers, I did so.

He was crossing the room now, near, nearer, nearer than everâ€|dangerously close. I could smell the bitter scent of alcohol on him as he towered scarily over me. "We'll be careful not to make clumsy little mistakes in the future, won't we?" he growled.

"_Yes, sir," I whispered tremulously._

_He looked, for a split second, like he was going to walk away then,

but he didn't. He shoved me so hard that my backpack slipped from my shoulder again and I fell a few feet away, trying to get up._

The backpack was only a few feet from him now and he stared down at it for a second before picking it up and throwing it, literally throwing it, right at me.

I gasped, but I barely had time to try to catch it before it hit me, sixty pounds of books hitting me full-force and winding me severely.

I gave a little groan, although I tried my hardest not to. It slipped out from between tightly clenched teeth.

I was still on the ground, but I was trying to at least get up onto my knees, before he kicked me, hard in the ribs. This drew a little whimper from me. I knew it would make him angry and I tried not to " but my ribs ached and throbbed from his kick. I couldn't help it.

"_Stop groaning," he commanded angrily, but this was easier said than done. Although no more sound left my lips, it appeared he still wasn't done. He picked up my backpack again and swung it over his head, letting it land with crushing force on mine._

My head throbbed like it was splitting open and I cried out, reaching up to massage it before he grabbed my arms and yanked them away from my head. He used them to pull me up, shoving me away from him until I hit the wall opposite, collapsing there as he stared down at me for another long second.

â€|

He was gone now, definitely. There were no sounds from the driveway. I let loose a little sigh of relief and tried to stand " my ribs and back both protested. The pain in my head had become background noise, but as I tried to stand, it flared again, suddenly and more painfully than ever.

I tried not to make any noises of pain as I slowly hobbled upstairs, mentally giving myself an 'X' for every whimper the trip took from me.

I made my way upstairs and was met with a pitch black bedroom. I leaned against the doorframe and felt around for the light switch. I couldn't sleep in the dark.

When I found it, I slowly stumbled over to my bed, hitting the mattress heavily.

â€|

"You're too old for a nightlight!" Dad snarled, grabbing the little blue lamp from off my bedside. I followed him outside, protesting the whole way there.

"I'm afraid of the dark, Dad, I'm afraid of the dark!" I protested " well, more like begged, really. "Please don't take the nightlight!"

He shook me off his arm, letting me hit the driveway heavily. He tossed the little lamp so heavily that it shattered where it fell. "You're ten years old, Hiccup. It's time for you to grow up!"

"I can't sleep," I begged him. "You know I can't, not when the lights are off like that."

"You'll get used to it."

"No, I won't!" I insisted. "You can't take my nightlight!"

Dad grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me back inside the house, slamming the door and locking it. "Who makes the decisions around here, me or you?"

"Iâ€|" I stopped, staring at the ground. "You do."

There was a silence as he nodded slightly.

"But, Daddy, I can't help it, I don't like the darâ€"

"If you're so afraid of the dark, losing your nightlight will help you get over it. Get to bed and leave the lights off."

My heart thudded. "Dadâ€"

"This isn't up for negotiation, Hiccup," he intoned sternly. "You are going to have to learn how to be a man and to be a man you must learn to get by without nightlights and such. You'll be fine. Just go up there and try."

I walked slowly up the stairs, like I was heading for the gallows. When I made it up there, I closed my eyes for about two seconds before I broke down. I grabbed the blanket and used it to cover my head, whimpering as I tried to get away from the dark I feared so much.

â€|

I closed my eyes, the light burning orange in front of my lids. Maybe it sounds stupid, or childish or silly, but I have never outgrown nightlights. I still sleep with my overhead light on, because I don't think he notices anymore. And I sleep with the light burning all night and I rock gently back and forth in my bed and I slowly, slowly sing a lullaby my mother taught me and I sing myself to sleep.

5. Mistakes

****Chapter 5: Mistakes****

****Yeah...this is how Hiccup got the idea for the X's, I guess? I like it, anyway. And, seeing as I'm still in an Overachiever kind of mood, I got this written :D ****

****I'm not trying to make the abuse like so wildly unrealistic, just so you know. I get an idea and I have to write it. I'm not trying to make the abuse so horrific, so Hiccup can have angst. I'm only trying to show you what it's like. Not all cases are as extreme. The abuse is still horrific and ugly no matter how "extreme" the case is. This**

is actually the turning point in which Hiccup's case becomes worse. His case was still bad, no matter what, but it's the point where Stoick starts beating him more severely and more often, if you will, but it took a couple months for them to reach this point. **

* * *

><p>When I woke up, it was a few minutes before I remembered what had happened last night and I only did that because I sat up too quickly. My ribs begged me to lay down again, but I gritted my teeth, trying to ignore the pain. I deserved it.<p>

I hadn't bothered doing anything last night except taking off my shoes, so my backpack was still in the floor beside me with all my books in it and my shoes were beside my bed, so I just pulled them on over the socks I had been wearing last night and grabbed up my backpack. I limped downstairs, opening the cabinet over the sink and taking down a bottle of Tylenol.

I hesitated on the point of taking one. I knew the pain was going to be bad today, butâ€¦I deserved it. Did I deserve it to the point that someone else might notice? It wasn't like anybody ever looked at me anyway, butâ€¦just in case, I reminded myself, slipping it into an inside pocket.

It rattled comfortingly against the pencils it rested beside, looking like it belonged there. I hitched my backpack onto my other shoulder, wincing slightly.

As I walked into the living room, heading for the front door, I glanced over at the empty space against one dirty white wall in the corner of the room, where the grand piano had once stood. My mom used to teach me how to play it. We used to play together sometimes. I'd always preferred the faint tinkling of the ivory keys to the thwacks of Little League baseball.

â€¦

I was sitting on the piano bench, roving my fingers over the keys lovingly, slowly. Dad was gone and he wouldn't be back, not anytime soon, anyway. I slowly began playing, letting each sweet note wash over me gradually. And then I played for real.

At first it was 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'. And then it was 'Happy Birthday', the ones my mother liked best.

I played melodies I only half-knew, and quite a few of them demanded other instruments, too, but I didn't care.

I could hear the creaking of the front door from somewhere behind me, but my eleven-year-old self didn't quite realize I should've run for cover. I thought maybe I could get him to smile and laugh again, get him to stop coming home drunk and shoving me into things or hitting me a few times a month, if only I reminded him of how happy he'd been when Mom was alive.

I kept on playing, my fingers finding the keys I needed with ease.

_And then a hand closed over my mouth, physically jerking me off the

piano bench, hurling me onto the floor. I hit the thin, stained carpet hard. Winded, I lay there for a second._

With shaking limbs, I leaned up on my elbows, my father's shadow standing over me, his eyes screaming hate. He ripped me up from the ground, my fingers scrabbling for purchase on the ugly brown flooring. When he had me by the waist, he threw me again, this time even further, like he wanted to make his desire for distance plain.

I blinked back tears of pain that were blurring my eyes. I caught my breath, staring at him through strands of auburn hair, feeling my fingernails digging into the carpet. He reached over then and delivered a kick so savage to my stomach that I curled into a ball, gasping.

_He rained blow after blow on me and my arms weakly covered my head, but his fists still found the rest of my body.

_

"_I'mâ€|I'mâ€|sâ€|sorryâ€|Dad," I choked, strangling over my own sobs and spit and blood. _

My dad picked me up again then, pinning me to the wall, yelling at me. "DOâ€|NOTâ€|EVERâ€|DOâ€|THATâ€|AGAINâ€|DOâ€|YOUâ€|HEAR ME?!" he gave me a sharp blow to the head that sent black spots dancing in my vision. I went limp against the wall and he released me, letting me hit the ground.

"_I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I sobbed, my words thick from my tears. "I'm sorry, Daddy, please."_

"_You killed her," he whispered, his voice deadly with seriousness. "You killed her. You dare touch her things now."_

I knew without having to ask that he meant my mother. I lay there drowning in sobs, with him standing over me, switching repeatedly between telling me that I killed her or that I'd better stop crying before he gave me something to cry about.

_But I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop crying and eventually he gave up. He walked into the kitchen and I could hear silverware clinking. I wondered with amazement if he was putting away the dishes so casually after such a scene. _

But when he came back, he held a jagged, sharp-edged kitchen knife. He rolled up the sleeve of my shirt slowly and sliced my skin open painfully, so painfully. I reached out for my bleeding, burning wrist, but he smacked my hand away.

"_If you make one single noise," he threatened, "I will toss you out like that piano."_

I nodded shakily. Not another scream escaped me after that and I did not reach for my arm again. When he released my hand, I looked down quickly to check what he'd done. There was a symbol carved into my arm, shining a bright scarlet from all the blood.

_It was a barely noticeable 'X', like he was writing me off as a failure or an accident. Like he was telling me I was a mistake. Like

I was trash._

Even as he left the house and I cleaned and bandaged the small wound, sure to scar, I felt like a mistake. Xs equaled mistakes, right?

Every time I closed my eyes that night, it was my father's angry face that I saw behind my lids. I knew I would be getting no sleep.

_I opened one of my notebooks, trying to do something, write something, draw something, just to take me away from this terrible, terrible night. _

I found myself an hour later, doodling Xs all over the page. And, the more I stared at them, I began nicknaming them.

That one there was Reject, that one was Misfit, the third one down is called Accident and I like to call that one on top there Mistake. I really like the sound of trash for the fifth one from the bottomâ€|
I thought sarcastically to myself as I stared at them and the more I stared at them and the more they stared at me, the more I began realizing every mistake I'd made tonight and reciting them. I had played the piano, for one thing.

I turned to a fresh page and neatly wrote an 'X' on the first line. I drew another one, just for good measure.

My next mistake would've been making my dad angry enough to beat me. I added about ten more Xs for that.

I drew another five. They were for earning a beating. The rest were for killing my mother. I sat up in bed until sunrise, doodling X after X after X, hoping to one day be able to make it up to my dad and be forgiven.

And when the sun shone bright and clear through my window, I ripped the papers out of my notebook and taped them up on my wall. I ripped down the few drawings I'd always kept up of mine and I shoved them under the bed. I left the page of Xs there, so the sun would rise on it every day.

Slowly, over the years, more pages of Xs have been taped up around it and so every morning, the sun shines through my window to look upon my mistakes.

6. Three on One

Chapter 6: Three on One

This probably gives people a very different idea of what goes on in this chapter than what really does xD So, I notice some of you might still be mad at me for rewriting with no warning...I'm sorry! But c'mon! Isn't this version much better?

* * *

><p>On quiet Fridays, when I knew my dad wasn't going to be home, I liked to sit in the gymnasium on the bleachers doing homework.

Sometimes, I had to try to study over the sounds of sports practice with the coach glaring up at me, like he expected me to heckle.<p>

When I slipped into the gymnasium that Friday, lost in thought about the beating I'd received on Tuesday night, I noticed the room was dark and quiet â€" just how I liked it.

I slid onto the cool metal bench with a sigh of satisfaction, pulling out my notebooks.

Before long, however, the doors opened again and a boy with thick, dark hair and round glasses as thick as the bottom of a soda bottle entered. He stretched his arms experimentally, rifling around in his hoodie pocket for a second before pulling out a pair of white earphones attached to a bright blue I-pod.

He stuck the earphones in his ears and turned the I-pod on, grabbed a basketball from the rack and slammed it down onto the court a couple times, like he was aching to get rid of either some pent-up aggression or just wanted to play.

I looked down at him for a few seconds, watching him play; he threw the ball into the basket one-handed and threw a hand up in the air in victory. As it bounced back over to him, he grabbed it again, pulled out his I-pod and pressed a button on it. He shoved it back inside his hoodie pocket and twirled the ball a couple times, letting it hit the court before throwing it back inside the basket.

He dug an earphone out of his ear as he caught the ball one-handed and then he looked up at me, tilting his head slightly, like he was curious.

I shyly dropped my eyes back to my homework, feeling my cheeks redden. _Busted._

I went back to my homework and worked on it for a little while, about half an hour, before I realized the sounds of the ball hitting the court and the squeak of his sneakers on the hardwood was gone. Looking around, I saw the boy wasn't anywhere on the court at all.

I caught a flash of black out of the corner of my eye and saw him sitting there, bobbing his head slightly to his music. When he caught me staring, he scooted closer to me down the bench. Something about him seemed familiar; I stared at him for a second, but I couldn't pinpoint it. Whatever it was, I knew this boy from somewhere.

He looked me up and down, like he was sizing me up. His eyes fell on my notebook and he said, "Cool drawing."

He must've been saying that to be polite, I told myself, because the drawing was terrible. I shifted a little so he couldn't see it and replied, "Thank you."

The little green light on his I-pod blinked as he pulled it out of his hoodie pocket again and shut it off, yanking the earphones out of his ears. "Why are you staring at me?"

He said it so straightforwardly that it caused me to blush. I shrugged, staring down at my notebook again. He got to the point so

quickly and seemed so confident in his assessment that I knew there was no use in lying. "You looked really good out there," I decided to say. "When you were out on the court, I mean. Do you play much basketball?"

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Nah, not much. Basketball was my uncle's idea. He said I needed a way to channel my restless energy."

"Oh," I nodded. "You joined the team because of him, then?"

He rolled his eyes, like he thought I was stupid. "Are you kidding? Me? On the basketball team? I'm just okay, for one thing â€" for another thing, those tryouts are all popularity contests, anyway."

"You looked good enough to get on it out there," I told him. "Of course, I'm making a 'D' in gym, so forgive me if I'm wrongâ€¦"

He chuckled. "What's your name?"

I glanced down at my notebook, tracing the lines of an X all the way around with one finger. "Hiccup."

He tilted his head to the side, considering. "Hiccup," he said, "isn't that like a bodily function?"

"It's an Old Norse name," I explained.

"Your parents must have really hated you," he said and he was chuckling a little, like he thought what he was saying was funny. At his words, though, my stomach and heart clenched.

"What's yours then, if you think you're so clever?" I demanded, a little miffed.

He played with his hood for a second, first pulling it up over his head, letting it drop back down and then pulling it up again to play with the edge. "Toothless."

Before I could even begin to ask him why he'd teased me about Hiccup if he had a name as equally horrible, the doors to the gym burst open again.

The two girls who entered were talking and laughing loudly; the one in the gray corset popped her gum and, when her eyes flickered over to the bleachers, she grabbed the other one, the girl with the bright red baseball cap and whispered in her ear.

Toothless' face stretched into a smirk. He ran down off the bleachers and onto the court and I followed because you couldn't really hear people talking from the bleachers and I was kind of curious about why he looked so thoroughly delighted to see these two.

The girl with the red baseball cap had blue eyes and, when they landed on Toothless, they looked him up and down.

There was a thick silence. The girl with the red cap opened her mouth to speak, but Toothless just smirked and rested a dirt-stained Converse sneaker on top of the basketball, folding his arms over his

chest. "What are you girls doing here? Surely, you weren't coming here to shoot some hoops?"

"So what if we were?" challenged the girl in the red cap; her voice was just what I expected it to be: haughty, feminine and confident. "What's it to you, _Toothless_?" she emphasized his name slightly and I got the feeling she was trying to insult him.

"I'm just surprised," Toothless shrugged. "Wouldn't think two sweet little girls would want to play. I meanâ€|aren't you girls more interested in fixing your hair just right than scoring a goal?"

"Oh, are we?" the girl in the red cap demanded, crossing her own arms and taking a step closer to Toothless. She was a large girl, I noticed, with strong arms and a fine-boned face. If I had been Toothless, I would've taken a step back; but to his credit, he was not me and so he didn't.

"I think you've forgotten who led this sorry team out of the gym and into the state championshipsâ€"

"Before youâ€"

"â€"and maybe, if you have forgotten, we should remind you." she reached down and jerked the ball from under Toothless' sneaker. He didn't lose his balance, so maybe he just let her take it.

She twirled the ball a couple times in her hands. "C'mon," she cooed, "play a game with us â€" boys against girls â€" and we'll see who's better."

Toothless gave a derisive laugh and the girl in the red cap looked ready to punch him. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he replied quickly. "I'm just saying â€" girls against boys, you know who's gonna win."

"Oh, do we?" she demanded, folding her arms. "You prove it to us, then, you and your friend. Me and Ruffnut against you and him." she jerked her chin at me.

"Whoa, whoa, wait â€" I began.

"You're on, Astrid," Toothless said before I could finish my sentence.

"Excellent." Astrid cooed, twirling the ball over in her hands so it became an orange blur.

"No," I said at once and they all turned to stare at me.

Blushing, I tried to explain. "I'm hopeless at sports."

Toothless gave me a pleading look.

"Why do I have to be involved, anyway?" I demanded.

"Leaving me to fight with two on one isn't fair," he whined.

"With me playing, it'll be like three on one." I assured him.

I swear I was being honest, but Astrid chuckled. Toothless folded his arms. "C'mon. You're not that bad."

"You haven't ever even seen me," I said. "And this argument has nothing to do with me. How about I sit in the bleachers with Ruffnut, so it's just one-on-one?"

"I'm not sitting out," the girl in the gray corset informed me haughtily.

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Okay. Fine. One quick game."

7. Complications

Chapter 7: Complicated

****A/N:** Yeah. Brief fluff. Chapter eight will be an abrupt return to the angst...I think xD also, this is just 2,309 words of fluff. I don't know what I was thinking. I cannot write fluff! Not in this story!**

* * *

><p>Of course, the girls ended up beating the pants off of us, but Toothless did do a spectacular job of one-man basketball for much of the game and that was pretty impressive.<p>

I was the main reason we lost; I was a liability and Toothless had to guard me as well as himself.

Astrid did a fist-pump when she won, grinning widely and twirling the basketball around her hands. "What do you say, Toothless?" she cooed sweetly, bouncing the ball on the court a couple times and letting Ruffnut catch it.

Toothless muttered something incomprehensible about beginner's luck.

"I do believe we just beat you," Astrid said smugly. "Now what do you say?"

"That this was a real stroke of luck?" He suggested, grinning slightly, regaining a bit of his old confidence.

Astrid reached over and socked him a good one, right on the shoulder. "_No!"

"Oh." Toothless shrugged. "It sounded that way to me."

"Oh, c'mon, Astrid," Ruffnut huffed. "I want to get there tonight and by the way you and Toothless go, that's how long it could take for you guys to finish your argument."

Astrid nodded and raced off to collect her backpack and jacket. As she swung her jacket around her shoulders, she dropped Ruffnut's backpack into the taller girl's hands. "There. You carry it." she fixed her jacket on, fanning the hood out and tucking her braid into the hood before swinging her bag over her shoulder and starting for

the door.

"Oh. Wait." she rested a hand on the exit door. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Uhâ€¦Hiccup," I mumbled, as Toothless, Ruffnut and I followed her over there.

"I haven't seen you around," Astrid informed me, letting the weight of her backpack drop onto the floor. I winced involuntarily at the loud thud it made.

"I'm new," I mumbled, pretending to be extremely interested in my sneakers. I studied the dirty laces as I waited for her reply.

"Hmm." she muttered, like she was thinking it over. When I looked back up at her, she was smiling at me. "You want to come with us?"

"With you where?" I blurted.

"Sweet Tooth," Toothless replied.

Astrid glared. "We weren't inviting you. Just Hiccup. And how did you know we were going there anyway?"

"You go there every Friday night since it opened up." Toothless replied with an eye roll.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were stalking me," Astrid countered, instantly on the defensive, putting her hands on her hips.

"It's not stalking," Toothless snapped, face going red; I couldn't tell if he was angry or embarrassed at the accusation.

They were clearly prepared to go on arguing for some time and so Ruffnut took pity on me and explained. "It's an ice cream shop. It only just showed up on the corner a couple weeks back. Have you ever been?"

I shook my head. "Sorry," I shrugged.

"You're welcome to come." she told me with a friendly smile. I wanted to tell myself that they were just pitying me, but something about her smile left me in no doubt that she was being genuine.

I glanced down at my sneakers again, wondering if they really wanted me there or not. I looked up at Ruffnut again; there was nothing but sincerity in her gray eyes. "Alright," I relented. "I'll come."

My head was full of the basketball game; home was the last thing on my mind.

The bell dinged loudly as we entered. The place was neat and tidy, an ivory building with that shiny look that new stores always retained for only a week or more before the town ran them down and they looked sad and lopsided.

The building smelled nice and clean and I took a breath through my

nose. Astrid steered us over to a table in the back, although there were other empty ones all around us; for a new store, it was almost completely deserted.

There was a little sheet taped on all the tables and when we took a seat at the farthest one in the very back, I realized it was a menu with all the different flavors you could get on it.

Astrid and Ruffnut barely even glanced at it, but Toothless checked it and gasped like his whole day had been made. "They have blackberry!"

"What?" I looked over at him.

He grinned sheepishly. "They have my favorite flavor."

The waitress arrived ten minutes later, a small, mousy woman with soft blonde hair and a notepad. She held a pen in her fragile-looking hands. "What can I get you?"

"Cinnamon ice cream cone," Ruffnut put in loudly and the woman nodded and quietly scratched it down.

"Blackberry cone," Toothless said, slightly quieter than Ruffnut.

She nodded and wrote that down, too.

"New York Style cheesecake cone," Astrid said.

The waitress turned to me.

"I'm not getting anything," I explained.

The waitress nodded and disappeared behind the counter again. I watched her go into the backroom before my attention was pulled back to my table by Toothless tapping me on the shoulder. I used to like being touched, but now I hated it; I scooted very slightly away from him, hoping he wouldn't notice.

He didn't. "It isn't weird, right, Hiccup?"

"What isn't?" I asked.

"Liking blackberry ice cream," he explained.

"That stuff is disgusting," Astrid chimed in before I could answer.

"That's not true," Toothless defended himself. "Have you ever even tried it?"

"It sounds like it is," Astrid added.

"It isn't, right?" Toothless demanded of me.

"Umâ€¦I don't know," I shrugged. "I don't eat ice cream."

"Hmph." Toothless slumped back in his seat, but he glared at Astrid. "Now, who's the weird one?" he jerked his head at me and I

flushed.

Astrid and Toothless resumed their argument, only ceasing when the waitress reappeared with their cones. Toothless' was a dark purple in color and Astrid's was white. Ruffnut's was ivory with pale brown swirls.

I didn't have anything, because I hadn't had the money to get myself anything, so mostly I just gazed out the window.

When my attention was brought back to my table again, Toothless was waving his ice cream cone in front of Astrid's face. "How do you know you don't like it if you won't try it?"

Astrid wrinkled her nose. "I am not trying that!"

"Oh, c'mon," Toothless urged. "And then you can judge me for liking it."

Clearly, the idea of having something to back up her 'blackberry-ice-cream-is-disgusting' argument appealed to Astrid. She took the cone and gave it a quick lick, wrinkling her nose when the ice cream touched her tongue. "That's gross," she commented flatly, handing it off to Ruffnut.

Ruffnut eyed the cone slightly apprehensively, but took a quick lick herself. "Ooh." she remarked. "It's not bad. I still like mine better, though," she smiled, passing the cone to me and raising her own.

I looked down at it as I took it, wondering what I was supposed to do. "Umâ€¦"

"How do you know you don't like it if you won't try it?" Ruffnut smirked, clearly glad to use the line Toothless had.

Trying not to think about how much saliva it carried from three other people, I gave it a lick. It certainly wasn't good, I decided as the fruity and slightly bitter taste entered my mouth, but it wasn't as bad as Astrid had made it out to be, either. It was a bit like all-black coffee: something you only have when you need to wake up, slightly bitter, and even then, taken with caution.

I handed the cone back to Toothless, mentally marveling at his endurance; how could he stand a taste like that for longer than a couple minutes?

He gave it a lick and, upon seeing my face, grinned. "You didn't like it?"

"It was alright." I shrugged, but, when he raised an eyebrow, I broke down. "I hated it."

"So, you've never been here before?" Ruffnut asked, gesturing to the shop.

"No," I shook my head. "I've only been here about a month."

"That's cool." Ruffnut smiled, but I could tell she was making small talk when she said, "Any cool classes?"

>Half of me was tempted to call her on it, but I just shrugged. "The coolest is art."<p>

"Did you hear about the art competition?" she asked, sitting upright in her seat. "It's supposed to be really cool, are you going to enter?"

I shook my head. "It sounds like it'll be really cool, though," I added.

"Yeah, sounds like," she smiled. "Are you any good?"

"I wish," I shrugged. "I'm terrible."

Ruffnut took a lick of her cone and eyed me for a second. "Do you need to get the taste of blackberry out of your mouth?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I think I'll be fine."

"You should try this, though, it's pretty good," Ruffnut said. She offered me her cone. I took it reluctantly and gave it a tentative lick. After tasting Toothless', I wasn't sure I wanted to try any other kind I was offered for a long time.

That opinion flew out the window the instant the creamy substance hit my tongue. The cinnamon mixed with the vanilla and I closed my eyes for a second, inhaling. "Oh, my god," I said before I could stop myself. "Where has this been all my life?"

Ruffnut giggled. "It's good, isn't it?"

"It's amazing." I declared, but I gave it back to her.

"We can share, if you like," she offered me a smile as she took the cone back. Her fingers brushed lightly against mine as she spoke and I became very aware that she was leaning across the table to speak to me.

She must've become aware of this, too, because she blushed suddenly and moved away from me. "Oh. Sorry. That wasn'tâ€|no." she took a deep breath. "Anywayâ€|" she studied the tabletop, for something to do, I supposed and I focused my attention on my sleeves, trying not to look at her again.

"It's so annoying sometimes," she mumbled, so low it might have been meant for herself.

"What's so annoying?" I asked her and she blushed. Yep, that mumble was definitely meant for her.

But I couldn't just back out now, so I waited to hear her answer.

"Ohâ€|umâ€|nothing." she muttered, resting her gaze on the tabletop for a second.

"Oh. Okay." I shrugged.

"It's just so obvious!" Ruffnut burst out, like she couldn't stop herself. "It's so obvious that they like each other, but neither of

them will do anything about it!"

I looked all around the shop, but the only people besides me and Ruffnut were Astrid and Toothless. When my gaze rested on them, I realized Astrid was leaning over to sock Toothless.

"Oh." I said.

She blew out a breath, sounding frustrated. "They're always arguing! Sometimes, I just want to tell them to get a room!"

"I'm sorry," I blinked, "I honestly don't see why arguing would be cause for romantic interest."

"That's their way of flirting," Ruffnut explained, like I was an idiot. "They don't want to admit it, so they teasingly insult each other instead and turn around and pretend those insults mean something. You see?"

"No," I told her.

"Of course not," she took a big breath. "Some people just can't."

"Oh." I said.

She took a long lick of her ice cream, studying them pensively. "I mean, honestly. You can get them so riled up just by saying 'I think you like Astrid' or 'I think you like Toothless' but it's pretty clear that they're just embarrassed."

"Oh." I said.

"Why doesn't he just do something, like ask her out?" Ruffnut turned to me, but I knew she wasn't looking for an answer from me. She was just ranting. "I mean, it's obvious!"

"Obvious maybe to you," I told her before I could stop myself. "I mean, I'd feel pretty awkward in his situation, too. Astrid acts like she hates him."

"But she doesn't!" Ruffnut huffed.

"Well, maybe she could stand to give Toothless a break," I offered. "If she's always acting like she hates him, he's never gonna know the truth and he's never gonna do it."

"Yeah, I know, I mean, butâ€¦|waitâ€¦|how did youâ€¦|?" her voice trailed off.

"You do know guys feel just as awkward as girls about this, right?" I said. "And the girls, they don't exactly make it _easy,_ you know? I mean, they have to be soâ€¦|soâ€¦|"

"What?" she raised an eyebrow at me skeptically. "If anything, the guys complicate things."

"But the girls make everything so hard," I told her, frustrated. "Half of them walk around with a chip on their shoulder, like, 'oh, all men are scum!'" I crossed my arms. "Well, some of us aren't like

that!"

"Don't expect a girl to instantly trust you," Ruffnut giggled. "Some girls have been hurt, Hiccup. Sometimes, they _can't_ trust."

"I don't," I told her, stung. "I just think that a lot of them generalize. And the ones who don't make everything harder, because they're practically clamoring to get a boyfriend, so they're always walking around twirling their hair and batting their eyelashes."

"Well, a lot of girls think that if they get a boyfriend, they have instant value," Ruffnut explained. "Like, before, they were nothing and now they're something, now that they have a boyfriend. Having a guy means they're somebody now, you know?"

I glanced at her. "You are freakishly good at this."

"Well, I'm only returning the favor," she shrugged. "You're helping me see Toothless' side, a little."

"Hmm." I mumbled, drumming my fingers on the tabletop.

Ruffnut took another lick from her cone, her eyes drifting back to Toothless and Astrid. "It'd be cool, though," she told me, "if all of this stuff was just a lot simpler."

8. If Only I Could Disappear

Chapter 8: If Only I Could Disappear

****This is chapter 8, witches. This was written to my playlist for this fic, which has 'Let it Go' from Frozen, along with 'Skyscraper' by Demi Lovato (the first version is still pretty close to my heart). Anyway. I'm really not feeling well tonight, so I think I might just sign off here soon. ****

****Reviews are seriously really appreciated right now. I could use a nice one or two, but if you dislike this chapter or don't have anything to say, I understand. I know how stupid this chapter feels, I just wanted Hiccup to have a fun moment where he gets to act like a child before he goes back to being all angsty. ****

* * *

><p>It was almost nine o' clock when I remembered about Dad. I broke off my conversation with Ruffnut, glancing up worriedly at the clock.<p>

"Uhâ€|" I barely remembered my manners as I pushed my chair back and told Ruffnut I had to go. Astrid and Toothless were still locked in their own conversation, so I raced out of the shop and into a sheet of icy rain alone.

The slick roads looked darker than they usually did, gleaming from the rainwater. I shivered as the rain soaked me through almost instantly; I hadn't even considered bringing a jacketâ€|not that I had one, anyway.

I raced through the dark streets, cutting into an alley to get home faster. I wasn't even sure how far away this place was from home. I cursed myself as I ran, my sneakers slipping and sliding on the pavement as I struggled to stay upright. I just couldn't be with them again, that was all, I told myself as I went skidding, leaning against a nearby brick building to retie my shoe. It had been a bad idea to allow myself to be around people, to force my company upon them. But it was another mistake in a long line of many. I could make up for it by no breakfast tomorrow, another hundred X's on the sheet and maybe a few blows when my dad came home tonight, if he did at all.

I finished tying my shoe and paused to take a quick breather.

In the darkness, I heard a voice and felt hot, alcohol-scented breath on my cheek. I wrinkled my nose at the smell, a bit of fear sliding into my stomach when I recognized the scent; it smelled like my father. "Spare me some change?" an elderly man was standing there, one dirty hand outstretched.

I felt myself beginning to go tense. I leaned up, away from the wall, trying to remain calm. "I'm sorry." I told him quietly. "I don't have any money."

As he slumped against the wall, looking disappointed, I started running again. Maybe I was running to get away from him and his sad, hollow-looking eyes; maybe it was guilt, because I lived in a house with a bed and blankets and a roof over my head when I didn't deserve it while this man was clearly homeless. He deserved it a lot more than I did.

I stumbled around blindly in the darkness, skidding to stops and turning random corners, lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood. What had possessed me to agree to go somewhere with anyone? It had been a mistake. Such a mistake. Now I was lost and I wasn't sure if I could make it home.

My eyes flicked over the sad brick buildings, taking in the graffiti, the damaged fences and dead grass. I quickened my pace; it wasn't a good idea to be out in a neighborhood like this at night, that much I knew.

I sloshed through the darkened, rain-soaked streets, slipping and stumbling and skidding everywhere I went from the slick roads. I put my hands in my pockets to prolong the chill from reaching them, but I knew it was going to soon; I was already numb and shaking from the cold.

Thunder boomed loudly up above my head and I winced, covering my ears. I couldn't tell if I hated the loud noises more because they scared me or because they signified that thunderstorms were coming. Either way, it had always been easy to scare me with loud booms or thumps.

I shivered again, kicking a pebble out of my way and into somebody's gutter. It made a clanking noise as it hit the metal, and their porch light flickered on. The screen door opened and a girl about my age stepped out, staring at me for a second or two before going back in her house. As her door swung shut behind her, I heard her yelling, "No, Ma, it's just some kid."

I pulled my sleeves down over my wrists and started running again, looking for something that was familiar. When I finally darted through a few clumps of bushes and came out into my neighborhood, I let out a cry of thankfulness, rushing forward into the streets. When I saw my house, with its unfriendly look, the closed windows and broken-down front door, I felt relief flow through me. I ran up to the door, throwing it open and coming to a skidding stop in the slick foyer. I stayed there for a long second, dripping rainwater on the floor and busily being relieved over my near miss. I took a deep breath, walking into the kitchen and taking a breather at the table.

When I finally got up the courage, I scoured the whole house for Dad and found it to be completely empty. I let out a happy little sigh, skipping off to my room to grab a change of clothes; Dad might not be here, but I was dripping wet and shaking with cold all the same. I didn't want to be responsible for making somebody slip and fall.

After I had gathered my change of clothes and used the bathroom, I zipped my pants and turned the faucet on to wash my hands. I reached over to squeeze the last of the antibacterial soap out of the bottle and I glanced into the mirror for one second. As my eyes met my reflection's, I glanced away as if scalded. I wasn't allowed to look at myself in the mirror.

Why would I want to, anyway? Who wanted to look in the mirror and see one huge mistake reflected back at them? I sneaked another peek at myself as I yanked the shower curtain open and I found myself fascinated. Who was this person with dripping wet clothes, large green eyes and long hair? Longer than I remembered, anyway. Darker than I remembered, although that would've been from the rainwater. How long had it been since I'd seen myself? A year? Two? Three?

I drank in the sight of myself almost greedily, thinking of all the times people had told me I resembled my mother. I wished I could be like somebody as kind as she had been.

I felt my mouth drawing down at the corners. I was about to turn away when I noticed a water stain on the mirror, probably left there long ago. It had long since dried.

I leaned down, letting my breath mist over the glass to wipe away the droplet, and, as I wiped the mist away, I watched in fascination as my reflection did, too. I swiped my hair out of my eyes, watching as my shaggy bangs fell right back into place. I tilted my head. The mirror did the same. I cocked an eyebrow. The mirror mimicked me.

I found myself smiling widely at the way my reflection copied me exactly. I stared at myself for another long second, pushing my hair back again, watching it fall into my eyes again. I giggled quietly, fascinated by the way my reflection did everything I did, in the exact way I did it.

When I heard the laugh erupt from my mouth, my eyes widened. I clapped a hand over my mouth, looking around myself nervously, half-expecting somebody to swoop down on me and tell me mistakes don't laugh. They don't even smile.

When nothing happened except that I glanced at myself in the mirror again and felt rather foolish, I lowered my hands. I smiled at myself again, showing my crooked teeth. I flicked my hair back again, leaning over and turning on the shower button. The spray was icy and numbed my hand almost instantly, so I pulled my fingers back and turned it to heat.

My eyes drifted back to the mirror. I scratched the side of my nose and grinned again, caught in fascination at my own reflection. Nobody else stared at themselves like this for so long or so much. I played with the edge of my soaked sleeve, my grin growing wider as I stuck my tongue out. I stopped sticking out my tongue and instead bit the inside of my lip, watching my reflection clench its jaw as it did the same.

My tongue slid out again and I watched as it licked my lips. I never noticed how much I fidgeted before today. My fingers were constantly moving, tapping against my thigh, scratching at my face or head, pushing my hair backâ€¦

Feeling a little self-conscious about it, I tried to stop moving and stand completely still in front of the mirror. When my nose began to itch, I reached up to scratch it and then reached out a hand to feel the water again. It was starting to warm up, so I yanked off my shirt and discarded it on the floor, unlacing my sneakers and pulling off my socks. I was reaching down to take off my jeans when I caught sight of myself in the mirror; scrawny physique, thin chest, a little 'X' still carved on the inside of my wrist, numerous scars all over my back and chest and stomach from my father's many beatings. I even still had a green and yellow bruise from the most recent one on Tuesday.

My fingers drifted from the button on my jeans to the scars, one hand going to my side, the other to my wrist. My brief amusement with the mirror faded away and I suddenly understood my dad was only being kind when he forbid me from looking at myself. He told me I shouldn't, not when I looked so much like my mother. I didn't understand that then, and I still didn't, now, but I understood he was trying to spare me the shame of seeing a mistake, just another huge red X in my notebook of mistakes.

I turned away from the mirror, not wanting to look at myself anymore. I unzipped my jeans and cast them aside, then stepped under the warm shower spray, wishing I could scrub myself away like a speck of dirt. Scrub myself away and wash down the drain. Everything would be better if only I could disappear.

9. Stay Away

Chapter 9: Stay Away

**A/N: Okayyy peoples. Sorry for my long absence, I was busy with other things. I hope you all enjoy this! This is dedicated to the beautiful RazzlePazzleDooDot, the amazing and brilliant .girl and everybody who has stuck around this long. **

* * *

><p>I mostly stayed in the house that weekend, doing homework and

adding Xs and waiting on pins and needles for my dad to come home.<p>

The one time he did, he barely looked at me. I watched his car pull away from the drive, my face against the glass of my bedroom window. I sank back down on the carpet against my bed.

The rain dripped like tears off the glass pane, drumming softly in the background on the roof.

It hadn't stopped raining all weekend. I had watched it while sitting at my desk doing homework, I had watched it while I added Xs to my sheet, while trying not to think about how hungry I was, I watched it while I waited for my dad to come and I watched it when I couldn't sleep on Friday night.

My head had been swirling with thoughts, both good and bad, about that night all weekend.

Were those people just really nice and pitying or did they actually like the mistake? And, if that was the answer, what about me had made them like me? I couldn't think of any reason why anyone would like me. I was just me. I was just a mistake.

I glanced down hopelessly at my sheet of Xs and quietly added one more and looked out the window again.

The sky was turning dark, but it was that little space between sunset and nightfall, where the sky goes dark blue, but there's still enough light to see by, to find your way home.

I wondered if Dad would be able to find his way home in the dark. I wondered if either of us even knew the way home anymore. When had we stepped off the path? After Mom died? After he smacked me that first time? The second, or the third?

And the most important question of all: would we ever be able to find the path again, the way home?

I knew it was early, but I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over myself, letting darkness fall around me, too afraid to get out and cut on the light. The rain pattered softly in the background, endlessly hitting the rooftops and asphalt and hoods of cars that might belong to Dad, his headlights clearing a path for him in the darkness. I rolled over to face the wall, watching my shadow move with every breath I breathed, and I thought about the way home.

* * *

><p>When I got back to school on Monday, I had gone back to being invisible. Guess those kids on Friday really had just been pitying, then.<p>

I did what I always did in school: I kept my head down and tried not to be noticed. I hadn't earned that many Xs today, so I was allowed to eat lunch, but I had no appetite. I sat quietly down at my corner table and took out my sketchbook to distract myself.

Ruffnut, Astrid and Toothless all entered the room at different times, but they all sat at the same table and laughed and joked for

about ten minutes before I dropped my eyes back down to my page.

Their distant table had come flying out of my pencil without my notice. Toothless was leaning over to talk to Astrid with a big grin on his face and Ruffnut was laughing as she raised her sandwich to take a bite.

I dropped my head, my bangs falling into my eyes. I flipped my pencil so the eraser touched the page and began to slowly erase a wonky line until I heard a voice from somewhere above me. "Hey, Hiccup."

Toothless' dark green eyes held a mischevious sparkle and his smile was easy and relaxed. "Do you want to come eat with us?"

"Huh?" I glanced up, my arm instantly going over my sketchbook to hide my drawing and not a second too soon; Toothless' eyes dropped down to my notebook.

"I was only asking if you wanted to come eat with us," he said, jerking his head over to the table where Astrid and Ruffnut sat, glancing over at us a couple times. His relaxed confidence seemed to flicker suddenly and he added, a slight blush turning his ears pink, "I meanâ€¦if you wantâ€¦" he trailed off, running his fingers through his shaggy black hair.

I wasn't really sure what to say. Laugh at me if you want, but nobody had ever once asked me to eat lunch with them before. In my old middle school, there was never enough space at the table or oh, no, they were saving it for someone else and yeah, there are places to sit on the floor and in the corners.

I stared down at my drawing for a second, uncertain. Was it rude to refuse? Was it a mistake to accept? "Umâ€¦okay," I mumbled. "Hold onâ€¦"

I shoved my sketchbook in my open backpack and stood, shouldering the backpack. It swung around, colliding solidly with Toothless' shoulder.

"I'm so sorry!" I blurted, mortified, as I lost grip on the bag and it spilled books everywhere. They made loud sounds on the dirty lunchroom floor, but Toothless didn't seem angry at all.

He laughed and knelt down, picking up the books and handing them to me to put in my bag.

"I really am sorry," I muttered, feeling two inches tall as I knelt down and grabbed the books from his hand.

"No harm, no foul," Toothless shrugged, but winced slightly at the movement. "This shoulder has seen worse days."

He winced again as he reached down to pick up more of my books. "Although it has seen better," he mumbled. "What do you keep in there, bricks?"

"I'm so sorry," I murmured, my face going red.

He picked up my sketchbook from the ground and the friendly smile slipped off his face as he glanced down at the page. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of himself sitting with Astrid and Ruffnut, the page I had left it open to. "Wow," he breathed, running a hand along the page. "That's really good."

I had expected anything, I repeat, anything but that.

"Umâ€¦uhâ€¦" The room suddenly felt way too hot, but I knew it was because my cheeks were coloring. "C-can Iâ€¦have that back, please?"

"Oh! Sure, sure," Toothless murmured, never taking his eyes off the page as he handed it back to me.

I tore it gratefully from his hands and stuffed it back in the bag, taking care to zip it shut this time.

Toothless set out, confident and graceful, on his way back to his own table, while I tripped and stumbled and apologized as I bumped into people.

"Are you going to enter that art competition?" Toothless turned suddenly to look at me as we drew nearer to his table.

"N-no," I stuttered shyly as we reached it, my cheeks flaming again. "No, I'mâ€¦I'm not good enough andâ€¦andâ€¦justâ€¦no." I shuddered at the mere idea of people seeing my work.

"Hmm. You looked good enough," Toothless informed me, taking a seat, so I did, too. "You should be glad for that â€" I can't even draw decent anime eyes." He chuckled.

"What?" I blinked, unsure I had heard right. "Draw what eyes?"

"Anime." He repeated, with no explanation.

"It's weird," Astrid declared, seeing my confusion and clearly deciding to explain for me. "It's like the Japanese version of cartoons."

"It's not all weird," Toothless replied defensively. "Soul Eater, Naruto, Death Note, it's all good!"

"Let me think," Astrid said sarcastically, ticking them off on her fingers. "Death Note is about a psychopath who kills people for sportâ€¦"

"Not evenâ€¦"

"Soul Eater is about people randomly turning into thingsâ€¦"

"Weapons!" Toothless snapped crossly. "And they don't randomly turn into weaponsâ€¦"

"And Naruto is about a half-humanâ€¦"

"He's not half-human, he's justâ€¦"

"Bottom line, it's weird." Astrid declared.

Toothless huffed. "I don't know why I even talk to you some days."

"Because you love me," Astrid responded casually, taking a bite of food.

Toothless went bright pink and, for a second, there was silence as he struggled to think of a good comeback. "I do not," he mumbled, embarrassed and wrong-footed.

"Anyway," Astrid finished her bite and said, "Do you boys feel like getting your butts kicked in the gym again?"

"I vote we switch to something else, personally," Ruffnut said. "Like soccer."

Toothless groaned. "No."

"Volleyball!" Astrid chirped.

"No."

"If you're going to shoot down all of our suggestions, why don't you come up with something?" Astrid demanded.

"Not that, okay? I hate volleyball."

"How about football?" Astrid said.

Toothless groaned.

"Dodgeball!" Ruffnut put in.

I shuddered and, without even thinking, I responded, "No."

Toothless nodded. "See, even the kid's got taste."

"Well, okay, what do you want to do this time?" Astrid demanded, crossing her arms.

"What should we do, Hiccup?" Toothless turned to me and raised an eyebrow.

I shrugged, wishing I could bring out my sketchbook. "Umâ€¦I don't knowâ€¦I probably won't even be there, I have to be home early tonight."

To face either an empty house and another round of Xs or a drunk and raging father.

I bit my lip. "Sorry. You guys have fun, though."

Toothless made a disappointed face. "You're gonna leave me with two on one, again?"

I laughed a little, shaking my head. "Sorry. Can't be helped."

"Maybe next time, then?"

"Maybe." My heartbeat sped up slightly. _No. Never again. Stay away from these people. _

10. unfiXable

****Chapter 10: unfiXable****

****A/N: Heyyy guysss, I'm back with a new chapter already, mostly because I already promised one of my readers :)" who then pushed me into writing the rest while BLOWING OFF HER OWN BRILLIANT FIC *coughs* RazPaz, I'm serious, go work on HS *coughs* ****

* * *

><p>I spoke to Toothless again.<p>

Add another ten Xs for that.

I agreed to lunch with him.

Another sixty for that.

I hit him with my book bag.

Another two hundred for that.

As I glanced down at the page, I realized I wouldn't be eating anything for a while, at least two days straight.

I added the final X and sat back in my seat with a sigh, before I remembered.

He saw my drawing.

I winced at the memory, adding another two or three.

He complimented it.

This time, I jotted down enough to finish the page, breathed out another sigh, twirling my pencil in between my fingers. I knew I should've been doing my homework, but I found I just didn't have the energy to grab my book bag.

I kept studying the wooden desktop, replaying the whole day in my head, wincing at the worst parts.

After I said 'maybe', Toothless flashed me a smile and gone back to hotly refusing every suggestion Ruffnut and Astrid gave.

They were all still arguing when the lunch bell rang and, when it did, Astrid and Toothless picked up their trays and went to the nearest trashcan.

Ruffnut rolled her eyes as she watched them go. "Sorry about them."

"_Oh, they're alright." I shrugged uncomfortably, my face growing hot. I played with the zipper of my backpack, wanting desperately to slip away now but not wanting to be rude about it. _

"_Where are you off to?" Ruffnut offered me a smile as she shouldered her book bag. _

_I shrugged without answering and picked up my own book bag, holding it in my hands instead of shouldering it. I'd caused a big enough scene for one day. _

I quietly studied the floor, only slightly cleaner than my black sneaker, as I struggled to think of an answer. Right now, I was such a nervous wreck that I couldn't even remember my own name, mentally adding Xs to the sheet. I deserved such punishment when I got homeâ€¦|

The bell rang a second time and I jumped slightly, thanking my lucky stars when Ruffnut looked startled.

"_Oh! I gotta go! See you around, Hiccup!" And then she slipped into the crowd and was gone._

"_Bye," I whispered. My single word went unheard in the crowd of kids pushing and shoving to get out the door._

I watched Astrid and Toothless pass by me, pushing and shoving each other as well, Astrid playfully punching his shoulder as they chatted.

_As I caught sight of their wide grins just before they disappeared into the crowd, I felt a pang in my heart, a pang of loneliness and longing and a deep, throbbing kind of pain. A hope so deep it hurt. A sadness so acute and so utterly ignored for so long. _

Even when they were out of sight, that didn't take away the strange kind of pain that haunted me, throbbing through me with such an intensity that it was almost physical.

The tapping of my pen on the desk increased in volume and speed as I thought of it. I had to stay away from those people. Why had they invited me to sit with them, anyway? Did I really look that pathetic sitting by myself, was that it? Did they pity me?

Or were they just as screwed up as I was? Maybe they saw a kindred spirit.

I glanced back down at the Xs sadly. No, that one definitely wasn't it. Nobody was as screwed up as I was. Nobody else was a mistake or at least not as bad of one as I was. No one on this green earth.

I let my pencil slide out of my grasp and onto my notebook, hitting the page of Xs with a soft patter.

I pushed the notebook away from me, the familiar but still unknown pang filling up my chest, like a terrible hole in my heart.

I picked up my pen again, slowly, reluctantly. I didn't have it in me to add another X. I let the pen go again, turning instead to my backpack, where all my homework was kept.

As I pulled out book after book, my stomach growled loudly. I groaned and rested a hand on my head sleepily. I wanted nothing more than to go to bed and pretend today never happened. Yank the covers over my head and scream and cry. Rip up every page of Xs, rip myself up, throw it all away. If only I were in pieces, pieces so small, my father couldn't hit me, so small the kids at school couldn't poke and prod and talk to me.

If only I were broken. Broken means you have some small chance of getting fixed, a tiny little hope.

I had no hope, because I wasn't broken. Something that happens to you in life is what breaks you.

Me, no, I wasn't broken, because I had been born a mistake.

I was unfixable.

11. Helpless

****Chapter 11: Helpless****

****A/N:** Hey. Sorry I've been so absent lately, I'm really sick. Thank you guys for all the reviews! Once I'm better, I might be able to engage my brain a little more and write. xP Sorry for this somewhat short chapter. I hope you enjoy it, though! :) Please review! :)

* * *

><p>I remember when I was younger, about eight or nine years old, my parents took me out of my school. The kids on the playground wouldn't ever pick me to play with them and they never let me sit with them at lunch, and a few of the kids even made fun of me right to my face instead of behind my back. There were even, occasionally, a couple kids from middle school that hung around the schoolyard every lunch hour, having a smoke and using the break between classes to harass the younger students. Some of the middle schoolers actually used their lunch hours to check up on their younger siblings in the elementary school down the street, but not the ones that visited our school. The ones that came to our school would enter the schoolyard and pick a student to harass or bully and sometimes it would be me.<p>

They would punch me a lot, and they would take whatever money I had on me, or sometimes they'd hide in the shrubbery on the playground, right in the spot where I liked to sit and read, and they'd jump out and scare me. Sometimes, they'd even steal my book from me and they wouldn't give it back.

I would come home crying about it almost every day, and finally my parents decided to take matters into their own hands.

My mother jerked me out of school and enrolled me into a new one, and my father reported the children's actions to the principal. I'm not sure what they expected to happen, but I heard that the older kids who had given me a hard time were let off with a stern warning. My father came home that night wearing the disgusted look he so often

tossed in my direction these days, but this time his disgust was directed at the principal.

"A warning," he fumed that night at dinner, glowering down at his plate of untouched food. "They're letting these kids get away with bullying and they're being let off with just a _warning_"

"You won't change their minds, Stoick," my mother chimed in gently, putting a hand on his arm. An unspoken agreement seemed to pass between them, because they looked at each other for only a second before he offered her a weak smile.

"I know you're right," he admitted grudgingly, picking up his fork and stirring the pasta around on his plate. Still, he didn't eat until the food had long since gone cold. "It's just not fair that people get away with hurting other people like that with no consequence."

"I understand." My mother responded, in her same gentle, measured voice.

My father took a slow bite of the pasta, chewing and shaking his head, still muttering, "A _warning_â€|"

That night, he took me outside and taught me how to throw a punch in the fading evening light.

I don't know why this memory is so clear in my mind, or even why I was thinking about it at all, but sometimes, I'll pull out memories like these, from back when my mother was still alive, before my dad hit me. Before I became imperfect, before perfection mattered. Because before perfection mattered, I did.

I remember that, after my father taught me how to throw a punch, after I enrolled into my new school, my teacher accidentally called me by the wrong name. She looked at the form wrong and accidentally introduced me to the class as Hyssop. I stood there at the front of the room, feeling my face beginning to burn, considering telling her my name was Hiccup, not Hyssop, but before I knew it, I was being shoved into a seat and a few of the kids were offering me smiles and greetings.

I kept my head down, I studied the grainy desktop instead of any of my classmate's faces, and I was instantly labeled as "stuck-up". I wasn't stuck-up though, or at least I didn't try to be. I was just shy. I went through that whole school year with the class calling me Hyssop. Looking back, I don't know why I didn't try to correct it. All I remember is sometimes opening my mouth to do just that whenever the teacher called on me, but the moment had passed, it was too late to tell her, and the idea of doing it made me feel very small and helpless.

On the last day of school, the teacher was still calling me Hyssop, and I still wasn't correcting her.

I don't really know why I was thinking of that, either, but all I knew was that, whenever Ruffnut or Toothless or Astrid was nice to me, that's exactly how I felt when the teacher called me Hyssop by accident. I felt helpless and scared and suddenly very small, unable to tell if their help was a joke or not, unable to tell whether I

should correct the teacher about my name or not.

That helplessness was felt again that day when Ruffnut caught up to me in the hall, walking with me to the algebra class I shared with her and Astrid.

She struck up a mostly one-sided conversation with me until we got to the door. She slipped inside and took the seat next to Astrid, shooting me a grin.

I offered them a practiced smile back and dropped my backpack beside my regular seat, pulling out my book as I waited for the teacher to arrive.

As I sat down in the small wooden desk, I felt somebody jab me in the back with their pencil. I glanced up, slightly peeved, as I met the eyes of Snotlout Jorgenson.

He was smirking widely as he stared me down. "I'm just curious, Haddock," he began casually. "You look like such a loser over here that I have to ask: are you naturally this bad or is it a practiced art?"

"Oh, shut up, Snotlout," Ruffnut groaned, like it was physically painful for her to hear him. "Just leave him alone."

Snotlout's eyes fell on Astrid and he smoothed down his dark hair, leaned across Ruffnut's desk and began shamelessly flirting with Astrid.

Ruffnut wrinkled her nose pointedly and took the seat behind me instead. "I'm really sorry about him," she said, and her gray eyes were sincere.

The heat of the blush was still strong in my cheeks, but I shrugged without really looking at her, embarrassed that she'd seen that. I stared down at the desktop for a second and Ruffnut put her hand over mine.

She smiled. "You're not a loser, okay?"

I looked up at her, surprised.

I wasn't sure what to say to that and I hesitated for a long second. Unfortunately, just as I managed to stutter out a thank you, my stomach growled quietly, reminding me I'd skipped breakfast and why.

My cheeks flushed, the thanks vanished on my tongue and I released Ruffnut's hand quickly.

"You hungry, huh?" she raised an eyebrow, but then she flashed me a bright smile. "Oh, you should come eat lunch with us again!"

Before I could respond, the door opened and Mr. Warren walked in, adjusting his spectacles, his normally rather kind brown eyes turning stern when they rested on Ruffnut in my row and Snotlout in Astrid's.

"Alright, people, settle down." He said, straightening his glasses.

"This isn't musical chairs."

Ruffnut slipped away, out of the seat behind mine and back into her own, offering me a wide smile before focusing her attention on Mr. Warren.

I found the corners of my own lips turning upward completely of their own accord and I quickly turned away from Ruffnut and back to Mr. Warren, trying to stop smiling.

12. Daddy

****Chapter 12: Daddy****

****A/N:** So, this is some nice angst :) Chapter 13 is already mostly written, I just need to put some finishing touches on it. It should be up within the week. If it's not, it means I stopped liking it XD**

* * *

><p>I remember, when I was ten or eleven, I was watching my dad watch TV, loving him from afar, wishing him next to me. He hadn't hit me since the night he'd come back. He sometimes disappeared without telling me why, sometimes just drove off in the middle of the night, leaving me to awaken in the morning, all alone. But it wasn't bad. He barely looked at me, but at least he didn't leave me forever.<p>

I remember he took a long sip from his can then, and I remember him setting it back down, empty.

I remember jumping up, volunteering to fetch him another. _His perfect little boy._

I remember him barely taking his eyes off the screen as he nodded, and I remember running to the fridge in eagerness. Unfortunately, I went skidding on the hardwood floor and tripped, scraping my palm roughly on a crack between two boards. The thud of my fall must have jolted my dad, maybe even scared him, because he came running. His eyes were wide with concern when he saw me curled up on the kitchen floor. "Hiccup, are you alright?"

I nodded, secretly marveling at his attention, quietly loving his concern for me. It was the first time he'd looked at me, really looked, for a long, long time.

"Let me see," he whispered, taking my palm in his hand. He looked at the scrape for a couple seconds before releasing my hand. "Would you like some help with that?"

"Oh, yes," I responded. I latched onto the hand he offered me and I stood. "Could you?" I could have done it myself, easily, but it was the first time he'd looked at me for a really long time. I insisted on clinging onto the feeling.

He led me into his bedroom, sat me down on the bed and began to clean it.

As he began to clean my palm, I grabbed at his hand with two fingers,

refusing to let him go. "Daddy?"

The word surprised both of us; I hadn't called him that since the night he'd hit me. A muscle in his face twitched, threatening either a smile or a scowl, but his eyes were soft.

"I love you," I blurted, scared to death that he was going to go away again, go away and leave me after this brief moment we had shared. I never wanted him to leave me again. "Don't leave me again, okay?"

The softness vanished. There was nothing of the daddy I knew and loved there. "Whatâ€¦did you say?" His low, threatening tone signified some form of danger.

I shifted uncomfortably, uncertain how to respond. "Iâ€¦I said I love you," I confessed in a low voice, hoping he wasn't as angry as he sounded.

His eyes turned cold and hard. Before I could even finish my sentence, he slapped me, hard, across the face. The impact sent me tumbling off the bed, onto the carpet. "Daddyâ€¦" I pushed myself up on shaky arms. "What did I do wrong?" A sob escaped my mouth, hard as I tried to suppress it. I knew I should have outgrown calling him that, but the sudden fear of what was to come had me reverting back to my childhood nickname.

"Shut up," he sneered, physically jerking me up by my shirt. "Don't you ever say those words again, are we clear?"

"Butâ€¦Daddyâ€¦" I sniffed, trying to catch a tear before it escaped my eyes. "Butâ€¦"

"But Daddy!" he mimicked in a whiny voice. "But nothing! You'll do as you're told! Understood?"

I stared at the ground, fingering the welt on my cheek, trying hard to push the tears back. He smacked me again, hard this time. My ears rang. "Understood?"

"But, Daddy, you're supposed to say I love you back, that's the way it worksâ€¦"

He did the same thing he had last time then: he grabbed my shoulders and shook me, shoving me away from him. I fell against the floor, my back hitting the bed. My tears only came faster.

"I will never say that to you again!" he screamed. "I will never, ever say that to you! And let meâ€¦" here he grabbed me by my hair, forcing me to stare up into his face. My heart raced, and I couldn't quiet the tears any longer. "â€¦Make something plain," he continued with a sneer.

"I am not your daddy. You will never call me that again."

Another sob burst forth. I couldn't contain it any longer. "Okay. Okay, just pleaseâ€¦"

"You disgust me." He whispered. He shoved me away from him again, leaving me there on the floor.

I lay there crying, even when he stomped away. I lay there conjuring up a fake reality in which he'd simply said, 'I love you, too' and offered me a smile.

When I looked in the mirror at the swelling the next day, I tried not to be ashamed. In fact, I even managed a proud smile at my reflection, like I'd gotten into a fight with another kid at school, and I was telling myself that he looked worse. All these marks showed was that my daddy " my father " loved me.

13. Stupid

****Chapter 13: Stupid ****

****A/N:** "Well, now they knowwww!" *coughs* ahem, sorry. 'Let it Go' is playing from my Youtube Playlist as I type this. I wrote this to that playlist, yep C: it was made especially for Overachiever. Um. Anyway. Hope you all enjoy this chapter, and thank you for all the reviews on the last one! ******

* * *

><p>"That being said, class, I would like you all to begin a journal for this year." Mrs. Merriman clasped her hands together and smiled at us like she was giving us a huge present.<p>

A collection of groans filled the classroom.

"How long does this have to go on, Teach?!" Snotlout Jorgenson yelled without even raising his hand.

"The rest of the year." she replied simply, walking back to the chalkboard and beginning to write something down on it.

As more groans sounded throughout the room, she added with a smile, "The entries don't have to be terribly long."

"Why do we even have to do this at all?" Tuffnut Thorston groaned.

"To sharpen your creativity and grammar." Mrs. Merriman replied, setting the chalk back down; her hands were ghostly white from the dust. "Some people " teenagers especially " will find writing is a wonderful form of relief. A way to get their feelings out there."

Seeing as I wasn't exactly bursting to "get my feelings out there", I was feeling about as reluctant as Snotlout and Tuffnut; however, I was less vocal about it.

"Do we have to write in it every day?" asked a tall boy whose name I didn't know. His thick, curly brown hair sprung in every possible direction, and he reached up to run his fingers through it as he spoke.

"It certainly is advisable, but it's not required."

Several people let out an audible breath of relief, and she smiled

again.

Before anybody else could say anything more, Astrid's hand shot up in the air. "Do we have to turn in our journals at the end of the year, and will you read them when we do?" she asked, swiping her bangs out of her face. "I think it would limit the number of honest entries if we did."

"You must turn them in, and I must see if the pages are filled, but if you ask me not to, I won't read them and I'll return them at the end of the year."

When nobody else asked any questions, Mrs. Merriman clapped her hands. "Mr. Haddock, kindly jog up here and hand out the notebooks?"

I scrambled to my feet, bumping my knees against the desk several times. As I put my hand on my desk to steady myself, I swiped a few sheets of Xs off. They fluttered weakly to the floor and for a second, I stood there frozen, unsure what to do.

"Mr. Haddock," Mrs. Merriman said in a sharp voice, to bring me back to reality, I supposed. It worked either way. "Pick up your papers, would you?"

"Oh. Yes! Of course!" I instantly, obediently fell to my knees and she called Astrid to hand out the notebooks instead.

"Whoa, hey, what's this?" Snotlout questioned quietly, nabbing one of the sheets and studying it. Mrs. Merriman didn't notice; she was too busy handing Astrid notebooks.

I didn't look up, pretending to examine the carpet, but my heart began to beat crazily fast. My hands shook as I slowly reached over to pick up another paper.

"You just write Xs in your spare time?" Tuffnut raised an eyebrow, leaning over to look at the sheet. "Dude. What a loser."

"Pffft. X is probably the only letter of the alphabet he knows. He's so stupid."

I could feel my ears burning and the blush was rapidly spreading to my face. I fumbled with the sheets of Xs, trying to convince myself Snotlout would give me the page back if I asked.

"Umâ€¦Sn-Snotloutâ€¦"

"Wait, that would make sense." The tall boy with the curly brown hair leaned back in his chair and spoke. "X is the letter for mistake, right? I think we've got exhibit A over here." he jerked his chin in my direction and my courage crumbled. I dropped my eyes to the carpet again, feeling a few tears begin to threaten in my eyes. I tried telling myself not to be so weak and stupid. I knew the truth. I knew I was a mistake. So why did it hurt so badly to have other people reinforce it?

The way their eyes probed my mistakes made me feel very small and scared and helpless.

I took a breath, trying to steel myself again. I rose slowly to my

feet, trying to blink back the tears. I think one might have spilled over, but nobody noticed if it did. "C-could Iâ€¦could I have that b-back, please?"

"Why?" Snotlout taunted, dangling it teasingly above my head. "I mean, it's just a sheet of Xs."

"Will you please just give it back?" Frustration, fear and desperation made my voice come out way louder than I meant it to.

Mrs. Merriman's eyes snapped onto us. "What's going on?" she hurried up the row to where we sat. Astrid dropped a notebook onto Tuffnut's desk, her blue eyes concerned when they landed on me.

"Nothing, ma'am." Snotlout released the evidence, kicking it under his desk.

Mrs. Merriman's eyes snapped onto me. "And what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Iâ€¦uhâ€¦Iâ€¦" I felt myself blushing and just shook my head awkwardly to indicate nothing.

"Very well. Gather your things and put them back on your desk. Make sure not to knock anything over this time."

"R-right," I stuttered, sure my face was beginning to glow bright red. The bell rang just seconds later, and I released a breath of relief. The term 'saved by the bell' had never been more accurate.

* * *

><p>As the other students began to gather up their things and leave, Astrid knelt down next to me, a page of Xs clutched in her hand. "Hiccupâ€" <p>

"Oh, um, thank you." I stammered, reaching out to take it from her. She didn't release it.

"Whatâ€¦what are these?"

"Oh, umâ€¦." My face burned. _Busted. _"Well, justâ€¦believe what Snotlout said, okay?"

She still wouldn't let go of the page, but she did raise a skeptical brow. "What did Snotlout say, then?"

"Didn't you hear?" I grabbed the page from under his desk, staring at it miserably for a second before shoving it back in the stack with the rest. "It's the only letter of the alphabet I know, apparently."

"He didn't!"

"He did, and it's true, I am stupid. Now please give me my page back."

She reluctantly handed it over. "Hiccup, you're not stupid. Don't you dare believe it."

"Astrid, Iâ€"

"I'd advise you two to carry on this conversation elsewhere." Mrs. Merriman said, sweeping up the row to stare us down.

"Right," I began nervously.

"We were just leaving," Astrid told her, grabbing my arm and dragging me out into the hallway, pulling me up against the row of lockers. "Now, before I go, let me get one thing straight: you're not stupid. I don't know you that well, but I know you seem like a cool guy. Too cool to believe that."

"It's true, though, I amâ€"

She cut me off with putting a finger on my lips. "Don't believe it, okay?" Then she disappeared into the crowd of people and was gone.

14. Light

****Chapter 14: Light****

****A/N: Hello, people! I honestly think I get some of my best writing on this story done in the mornings...well, anyway. Enjoy! Is this any good? I really don't know...please review! Thank you for all the reviews last time!****

* * *

><p>It took me awhile to unstick myself from the locker doors, but when I did, I realized the bell had already rung â€" twice. Not a good sign. I scrambled to my next class, and slid into my usual seat in art just as the late bell rang.<p>

Ms. Delaney gave me a playfully annoyed look. "Cutting it a little fine, aren't we, Hiccup?" she teased.

I blushed, reminding myself that she did this to every student who showed up late. "Sorry, Ms. Delaney. It won't happen again."

She sent me a smile before returning her attention to the whole class, and I stared down at the sheets of Xs I'd collected from the floor of the classroom, replaying the scene from English class in my head. The way Snotlout had dangled the sheets out of my reach and laughed, like he'd thought it was funny, like he'd thought it was a gameâ€|

"Now, I want you all to listen up, because we are going to be starting a prompt project!" Ms. Delaney grinned at us, giving us the jazz hands as she spoke. "In short, I'll give you a single word that will spark your creativity. You will attempt to draw it as best you can. I have a list of great ones right hereâ€|hold on, let me see if I can find itâ€|" For a teacher, Ms. Delaney was disorganized as the day is long.

She shifted several papers around, pulling a piece of bright pink and purple stationery up off her desk. When she set it back down, I saw

she had doodled hearts and books all over the page. "Here it is, class!" she grinned. "Never fear, I always find what I need in the end! Right, so, I'll be randomly picking a prompt and you will attempt to draw it in the time we have left!"

I felt myself beginning to relax a bit as she talked, the scene from English class fading into the background of my mind. Like I said, art class made me feel like I had breathing room. Nothing else did in this way. I opened my sketchbook, burying my Xs beneath the thick, shiny white pages. I picked up my pencil, twirling it between my fingers, waiting to hear the prompt.

"Alright, the prompt is light," she informed us, setting her page back down and smiling at us. The bracelets on her wrists clinked and clanked whenever she moved her hands. "Anyone? Does that spark creativity with any of you?"

If it had been darkness, I would have drawn my house. But seeing as my house was nowhere near light, I couldn't run to that for defense. So I ran back through my mind, trying to pick my favorite memories. Trying to separate the darkness from the light.

I stared down at my pencil as I thought, and pretty soon my pencil was going along the page, scribbling around the edges, hopefully bringing life to the white page. What I'd said about art class earlier was perfectly true: I had breathing room here, time and space didn't matter. And I surprised myself by forgetting to make sure the drawing looked perfect, forgetting to add Xs because of what had happened in English class. The light swirls and strokes of my pencil brought me to another time and place, one where I could maybe, one day, be happy. Maybe one day, in this little alternate universe, I wouldn't be a mistake, and I would be happy. I wouldn't have to add Xs, or starve myself as a form of punishment. In this world, Mom had stayed alive, and Dad had never hit me. They both loved me still. The false reality came to life under my pencil and every stroke felt like a huge check mark, a huge weight off my shoulders. When I realized this, I stopped drawing in the center of the page, choosing to line the drawing with little check marks instead. When I was finished, the bell wasn't yet ringing.

Ms. Delaney began walking around the room, randomly asking to see other people's drawings. I pretended I still wasn't finished with mine. Maybe that would make her keep her distance.

Of course, it never works out that way for me, and all too soon, she was standing beside my desk, asking to see what I had so far.

I slid my arm off my sketchbook reluctantly, letting her have a look. She stared down at it, her eyes going instantly to the first frame, the frame of a woman and a little boy. The woman was holding the little boy's hand, and music notes swirled around them as she sang him to sleep. I felt sure it was a beautiful lullaby. One I would now never know.

Then her eyes swept over the second frame, the frame of my father in the backyard that night, waiting for me to try to throw a punch. Waiting for me to learn to defend myself. And I remembered that I'd given a sort of nervous laugh, and told him that I was not going to punch him. No, I wasn't even going to try.

Dad had smiled slightly down at me, and explained to me that I wouldn't hurt him. He'd showed me that I wasn't yet strong enough to hurt him. And I'd told him that I wouldn't be this way forever.

"One day, I'll be big and strong like you!" I beamed up at him, sure that he was going to laugh and smile and agree with me, just like always. Because for some reason I didn't understand at that age, my dad always laughed and smiled and agreed. Very agreeable. Never angry. Never outraged. Not until this night, not until the principal let off those kids with just a warning. The evidence of the anger had been written all over his face, but he had simply smiled at me that night and it had faded. Everything had gone away. I had chosen to believe that he wasn't angry anymore.

But this time, Dad didn't smile or laugh. In fact, his smile faded, and the lines around his eyes grew deeper than ever. "Yes," he agreed quietly, "yes, you will."

I had the feeling that I'd said something wrong, something to make him sad, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

Ms. Delaney was smiling a bit at the picture of us in our backyard, my father grinning down at me as he explained that I couldn't hurt him with my fists. _So why could he hurt me? _

I shook my head to clear it. I was in school. School and my home life normally stayed far away from each other. Two spheres that were simply not allowed to touch. I was sure a colossal explosion would follow.

She turned her attention to the third frame: my father cleaning my palm, barely even looking at me, but paying attention to me and caring about me nonetheless. Finally, for once, remembering that he had a son, remembering that I needed him, too. And then all that was forgotten within two seconds, because of three words that I would sooner cut out my tongue than ever utter again.

I closed my eyes as I thought of it. Why did all my happy memories, why did all the light have to mix so easily with the darkness? One shining moment of golden color before the night reclaimed it, contaminating it. If my father had not hit me for saying I love you, then that memory would have been nothing but light. But darkness was always waiting on the edges to creep in, to steal away everything you have. I didn't want to stand by and let it, but I knew by now I had no choice. I simply watched it overtake everything about me, sometimes without even noticing and other times with perfect understanding as to what was going on.

Ms. Delaney turned her attention to the fourth frame, and I can't tell if she was confused or not by the outline of the boy, his silhouette composed of check marks. All check marks, like he didn't know how to make an X. Like he was perfect and happy and full of light. Not stupid and sad and gnawed on by darkness.

She didn't ask about it, though. She simply slid the paper back towards me and said, "Good job! There's a lot going on in the scene. It's really powerful." And she let me take the drawing back. I guess some people would say that it's a good sign that she didn't give me a criticism, but I don't think Ms. Delaney has ever given even the worst artist in her class a single word of negativity.

In fact, speaking as the worst artist in her class, I'm sure she hasn't.

I glanced back down at the drawing, remembering the happy boy with the smile, his outline full of check marks.

And then, as I shifted the sketchbook so I could reach the places I needed better, a couple Xs fluttered in the breeze, one of them dropping to the floor.

For a second, I glanced up, terrified, remembering the scene in English class, but everybody else was so focused on their work that they didn't even notice me. I picked up the sheet quickly, and then stared miserably down at mistake after mistake, hating myself for the way hot tears stung my eyes. I didn't want to cry anywhere, least of all in school, but it was getting harder and harder to push the tears back every time I did.

I pulled the newest sheet closer to me and began filling it up with my mistakes.

15. Three Questions

****Chapter 15: Three Questions****

****A/N: Hey guys :D I hope you like the new chapter! ****

* * *

><p>Astrid wanted to know about the Xs, and I could tell. She watched me carefully take my now not-so-dreaded seat at their table and she watched me carefully pull out my book, open it to the latest page and begin reading.<p>

Normally, I never read when other people were around â€" it was rude for one thing. But today, I wanted to avoid any and all conversation, if possible. I knew this was a lost cause when Toothless took his place beside me, across from Astrid and said, "So, what's up?"

"Don't ask me," Ruffnut replied, sliding into the seat beside Astrid. "I never know what's going on."

I couldn't hold back the chuckle that escaped at her words.

"What are you reading?" Toothless' dark green eyes sparkled eagerly. "Can I see?"

I showed him the cover: I know what you did last summer by Lois Duncan.

"Sounds creepy," Ruffnut declared, taking a good long look.

I shrugged. "If you want creepy, this is not it, really."

"If you want creepy, try Jay Bennett's 'The Executioner'," Toothless added.

I shuddered.

"You've read it before?" he raised an eyebrow in my direction, a grin spreading over his face.

"I don't think I slept the night I read Ed's death," I told him and he laughed. For some reason, I laughed a little, too, more at my own stupidity as a twelve-year-old, thinking I could handle a book like that. I'm sure that my laugh sounded tremendously dorky, but at the time I was honestly enjoying my conversation.

"But that wasn't even scary!" he laughed.

"Says you!" I replied, glancing back down at my book. "Have you ever read any other Lois Duncan before?"

Toothless shrugged. "_The Twisted Window_. _Stranger with My Face_. _A Gift of Magic_. _My favorite was _Stranger with My Face_."

"That was like a bad fanfiction," I told him.

"This is Toothless, remember?" Ruffnut cut in. "He watches anime. His standards are not high."

"Hey! Anime is not like bad fanfiction, either!" Toothless huffed.

"Some of it is," Ruffnut replied. "Did we ever tell you about the time Toothless tried to make us watch anime?"

"They turned their noses up at it!" Toothless snapped, like he couldn't believe it all over again. "I showed them the best one I knew, and they turned their noses up at it!"

"It just could have used some improvement," Ruffnut told him.

Toothless clutched at his heart like he'd been wounded. "I know nothing's perfect, but that was as close as it gets!"

"Nothing's perfect?" I raised an eyebrow, surprised out of my book. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Actually, the phrase is 'nobody's perfect'," Ruffnut told me. "I think it's something to remind people not to be so hard on themselves."

_Well, if nobody's perfect, I'm the farthest from it. _

"Umâ€¦" As I began trying to think of a new direction to steer the conversation in, Astrid and Toothless both spoke up at exactly the same moment, their words running together.

"Hiccupâ€¦"

"Why aren't you eating?"

"What?"

"What?"

"You first," Toothless told Astrid.

"No, you," she insisted, shaking her head a bit.

"Alright." Toothless shrugged, turning to look at me again. "Why aren't you eating? You didn't bring any food and you're not buying any."

"Not hungry," I tried to lie, my mouth beginning to go dry, my hands beginning to shake.

The few seconds of silence felt to me like the longest ones of my life. And what broke it?

My stomach growling. Of course.

I put one hand on my abdomen, silently begging my body to shut up. But I hadn't eaten anything all day, and I think it was determined to win this round. If anything, the growls became a bit louder.

Toothless raised an eyebrow and Astrid's blue eyes grew a bit colder.

"Tell that 'not hungry' to your stomach," Toothless told me.

"Why don't you go buy some food?" Astrid suggested, like it was the easiest thing in the world.

"I don't have any money." I whispered.

For a second, I thought I saw a bit of pity flash in her eyes and I wondered if I'd sounded like Oliver Twist when I said it. "C'mon." she motioned for me to come join her, dragging me over to the counter when I reached her side of the table.

"Where are we going?" I stumbled over my feet, trying to regain my balance.

"I'll buy you something."

My cheeks heated. "Don't waste your money on me!"

"You're hungry," she pointed out. "I can hear it. If the only issue with eating is money, then you shouldn't be ashamed of that, alright?" she unzipped her backpack and dug through it for a second, but emerged victorious, holding a few dollars in her palm. She dropped the money in my hand.

"Astrid, you shouldn'tâ€"

"Hiccup." she turned and put a finger to my lips. "I am going to buy you food, and you are going to eat it and you are going to answer my questions."

I think I dreaded every part of that, but I dreaded the last part the most. "In that order precisely?"

"No," she responded shortly, handing me a tray. "Grab anything. Now,

I want to know what those Xs are about." she crossed her arms over her chest, looking at me.

"Astrid, I really have to get to my nextâ€"

"Class doesn't start for about another twenty minutes," she responded promptly. "Now answer my question!"

I backed up slightly, trying to find a way out of this.

"No, wait, make that two questions!" she added. "Why don't you want to eat?"

I ran my fingers along the tray, mumbling an answer. "Umâ€|"

"No, wait!" She interrupted me again. "Three questions! Why'd you call yourself stupid?"

"Can't we handle this later?"

"No, we can't."

"Look, why do you careâ€"

"Answer my questions first."

"The Xs are nothing! They're just random doodles!"

"That's what makes me think they aren't!" Astrid snapped, blue eyes blazing. "Every time I mention them, you freeze up! Don't think I don't notice! And when you finally do speak, you mumble stuff about how they're 'just doodles'!" she put air quotes around the last two words. "I could accept that excuse, but not when you're so obviously lying!"

"Astrid, I'm notâ€|"

"You know what, whatever." she sighed, closing my fingers around the money. "You should buy yourself something to eat."

And then she had disappeared into the crowd and there was no way to refuse, to tell her I didn't want her money or her pity.

I stared at the bills clutched in my hand for a long second, slipped them in my pocket and put the tray back where it was. I headed for the lunchroom doors, pushing them open, having them swing shut behind me as I caught Astrid's ice cold gaze, staring at me from halfway across the room.

16. Hiding

****Chapter 16: Hiding****

****A/N: :D I really like this chapter. Thank you all for the reviews! You guys are truly wonderful! ****

*** * ***

><p>The next ten minutes found me locked in the biggest stall in the

nearest boys' bathroom, adding Xs to my sheet. I was trying to keep from crying. The dollar bills felt like they weighed a hundred pounds.<p>

The tears rushed to my eyes again. I knew I should go back to class soon; the first bell had already rung, but I remained on the floor. It was crazy, but somehow it felt a bit safer in the stall than it did anywhere else. The doors locked, my Xs my only company, my pencil in my hand. Nobody could hurt me here. The only person who could was myself.

Now that the second bell was beginning to ring, kids were starting to enter the bathrooms so they could go before class. I stayed locked in my stall, hoping they would go away.

When they didn't, I stuffed the Xs back in my backpack, swinging it back onto my shoulder. I needed to get to class, anyway.

I thought I could make it to the door before anybody else came out, but before I even reached the shiny silver handle, the stall door opened and Snotlout Jorgenson walked out. He turned on the tap and stuck his hands underneath it. "Oh, hey, loser," he grinned, spotting me.

I took a quick step backward. "Hi," I responded. It came out in a choked whisper.

"Hi," he mimicked, adding a quiver to my voice that I didn't think had been there the first time. "What are we, in preschool?"

He grabbed a paper towel, swiped it along his hands once and threw it flawlessly into the garbage bin. I clutched my backpack very tight the closer he drew to me. When he was finally in front of me, he wouldn't leave, just stayed there towering over me.

"You're blocking the doorway, Useless," he said at last.

"Oh!" A blush spread over my cheeks. "I'm so sorry!" I began to stammer out more apologies, trying to get out of the way and succeeding only in tripping over my own feet.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Snotlout muttered, shoving me to the ground and opening the door himself.

I landed on the cold tiled floor, my backpack beginning to spill its contents. And what were the two things on top?

A page of Xs and my open sketchbook. Of course.

Toothless pushed past Snotlout, ambling into the bathroom, but one look at me and his green eyes sparked with anger. He turned on Snotlout. "Jorgensonâ€"

"Why do you always assume the worst of me?" Snotlout asked in a mock-hurt voice. "The klutz could've fallen all on his own."

Toothless raised an eyebrow. "Did you?"

"I could have," I mumbled.

"Oh, really?" Toothless turned back to Snotlout, seemingly furious that he hadn't caught him in the act. "Well, any more incidents like this and I'll have to report you to the school!"

Why was he overreacting? It was just a shove. What did it matter?

"Oh, yeah." Snotlout chuckled a bit, a sneer beginning to spread across his face. "Because that worked so well last time."

Toothless actually winced at Snotlout's parting words, standing there for half a second longer, frozen, staring at him.

Snotlout smirked. "Excuse me, I have to get to class."

He pushed past Toothless easily and, though Toothless staggered, he didn't fall. His fingers latched onto the wall. I noticed they were shaking a bit. His lips parted and he tried to form words, but nothing came out.

The door creaked shut behind Snotlout.

"What did he mean?" I sat up, looking up at him curiously.

Toothless flushed, turning his attention to the floor. "It's, umâ€¦it's nothing," he mumbled, but he pulled the hood of his jacket up all the same, as though he was trying to hide from me. I think the only reason he picked up my sketchbook at all was because he spied a welcome distraction; kneeling down on the dirty floor, he slowly scooped it up, drinking in the latest drawing. The one of light.

"You're a really good artist." he told me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Umâ€¦"

"Is there any particular reason you don't want to enter that art competition?"

My cheeks flushed. "I'm not very good," I mumbled. "Not compared to other people."

"Are you kidding?" Toothless gaped at me. "This is really, really good!" His eyes fell on the drawing again, his brows knitting. "I'm not really sure I understand why you drew the silhouette of yourself in check marks, but I like it."

Silhouette of me? That wasn't meant to be me.

I bit my lip, waiting for him to say something else.

"Well, either way, it's good." he insisted, handing it back to me. "And you should really enter that art competition."

I tried to smile at him as he gave me my sketchbook back, but the blush heating up my face probably made me look like a dork.

I had meant to ask him what Snotlout was talking about when he said,

'because that worked so well last time'; but Toothless, I found out that day, was very good at steering clear of the subjects he didn't want to talk about.

And I only wished I could learn his secret.

17. Temptation

****Chapter 17: Temptation****

****A/N: I realize this chapter's not that great, but I actually like it. Thank you for the reviews! I also realize it's random, but I liked it. ****

* * *

><p>I was looking forward to getting out at the end of the day, but it didn't prove to be the solitary walk home that I thought it was going to be.<p>

Instead, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Toothless, his green eyes sparkling with excitement. "Want to come with?"

I noticed Astrid and Ruffnut standing slightly away from us, watching as Toothless invited me along on whatever endeavor they were planning.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked, trying to adjust the strap of my backpack. I finally worked it into a comfortable position between my shoulders and looked back at Toothless quizzically.

"The ice cream shop," he responded. "Well, the girls are going and I just kind of invited us along. There's no party without me," he grinned.

The logical thing to do would have been to say no, am I right? Of course, I'm not exactly known for being logical.

The temptation of staying away from my bleak home and my Xs was too strong to ignore. And besides, Dad was never home early. What's the harm?

The bell dinged loudly as we entered the shop, backpacks heavy on our backs.

The girls nabbed a corner table and Ruffnut set her pack down to mark it as ours before going up to the counter with us.

"Welcome to Sweet Tooth, what can I get for you today?" The dark-haired waitress barely looked up from what she was doing as she spoke. When she did look up, she gave us all the once-over. As she scanned us, I saw her nametag read 'Heather'.

"You guys ready to order?" she placed one hand on the counter, tucking a long strand of hair behind one ear.

"New York Style Cheesecake Cone," Astrid replied.

"Cinnamon ice cream cone." Ruffnut chipped in.

"Blackberry cone." I'm pretty sure you all remember who said that.

"And you?" Heather leaned across the counter towards me, a smile tugging at her lips. She batted her long eyelashes in my direction.

"Umâ€¦" I blushed. There was no way, especially not in front of this girl, that I was going to admit that I didn't have enough money. "Uhâ€¦"

"Chocolate milkshake."

Surprised, I glanced over to see Astrid staring straight ahead, not looking at me.

"Alright," Heather nodded once in her direction, her gaze flitting back to me. Her eyes were large and green, very pretty. Her crimson lips spread into a slight smile when she locked gazes with me again. "It was really nice talking with you."

I think I heard Ruffnut give a sort of annoyed huff as we began walking back to our table, but I was more concerned with Astrid.

"You shouldn't have bought me anything," I told her.

"I didn't know what to get you," she responded, stepping back and allowing Ruffnut to slide into her seat before doing so herself. "I hope you like chocolate."

"Hey, when our order comes, you should get it," Toothless informed me as I took the seat across from Ruffnut. He seated himself beside me.

"Me? Why?"

"I think that chick behind the counter was flirting with you," he raised his eyebrows suggestively, leaning back in his seat like he'd been here a hundred times before.

The temperature seemed to rise about ten degrees. "Wh-what? No, she wasn't!"

"Well, she never even took her eyes off you once," he huffed. "What do you call that?"

"Iâ€¦uhâ€¦"

"Maybe she likes the stuttering artist type?" he suggested, his grin widening.

"No!" I could feel myself beginning to blush.

Toothless chuckled.

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop and played with the zipper on my backpack. Nobody was really speaking much and to me, at least, the silence felt awkward. For something to do, I guess, I unzipped my

backpack fully and reached for the Lois Duncan book again.

Before I could, Toothless cried, "Oh, yeah! You guys gotta see this, Hiccup's a really good artist! Show them, Hiccup!" Really. Really. Loudly.

I coughed, feeling myself begin to blush. "Umâ€¦"

"Ooh, can we?" Ruffnut brightened up a bit, leaning across the table towards me.

"Uhâ€¦" I could have refused. So why was I taking out my sketchbook and showing them the drawing of their table I had done only a week or so back?

My hands shook as they examined the drawing.

"Wow." Ruffnut said finally. "You're fantastic."

My blush deepened. "No, I'm not."

"You really are," Astrid insisted.

Even though I knew they were just saying it out of pity, I couldn't stop the burst of pride in my chest. "Thanks, guys."

"Order up!" Heather called, making me jump.

"That's you, I believe," Toothless grinned, sliding out of his seat to allow me out.

As I crawled out, I began to stammer. "Are you sure she was flirting with me? I mean, maybeâ€¦"

"Go." Toothless gave me a light shove towards the counter, and I stumbled, nearly tripping over my feet.

I reached the counter without incident, holding out a hand for the cones.

Heather's smile widened when her fingers brushed mine. "Here."

I think I might have crushed the cones with how hard I gripped them. "Thanks," I squeaked, and then, because it was the first thing to come to mind, I blurted, "Can I have some napkins?"

She nodded without speaking, disappearing into the back. I sagged against the counter in relief, trying to resist the urge to sprint back to the table. Toothless was sitting there, giving me a wide grin and a thumbs-up.

When Heather came back, she was sliding a stack of napkins into my hand, her fingers lingering over mine. "Come again."

I glanced down at the napkin stack, sending her a quick smile that I'm sure looked more like a grimace.

But when I saw a handwriting on the top napkin, I moved my hand, giving myself a better view of it.

In shiny black Sharpie were the words, 'Call me!' complete with a number and a smiley face. I think I did a double take to see if she was still behind the counter.

She winked.

18. Don't Worry

****Chapter 18: Don't Worry ****

****A/N: Okayyyy things kinda happen fast here and I do not know what is up with me and my horrible inability to write unconscious Hiccup, but I'm reallyreallyreally horrible at it. Please forgive me and review anyway. ****

* * *

><p>Don't worry.<p>

That's the whole point of this chapter, is to tell you not to worry. You must think I'm pretty happy, huh? Looking back, that probably was the happiest night of my life, just sitting there talking with Toothless, laughing at his jokes, pretending to be a normal person. Only, it didn't feel like pretending. In those moments, I actually felt normal. I wasn't thinking of my father, or how much of a mistake I was. I was justâ€¦feeling normal. And it was the best feeling in the world.

Oh, but don't worry. I know that a mistake isn't supposed to be happy. And fate seemed intent on reminding me of that. Because that was the first and last night I fell asleep smiling for a long, long time.

I awoke the next day still smiling, the napkin still where I'd shoved it in my pocket. The day went by pretty quickly and the routine of talking with Astrid and Ruffnut before class seemed almost normal, now. Even sitting with them at lunch suddenly wasn't the dreaded event it used to be, but just simply part of my day. Although it definitely was one of the highlights.

Astrid didn't bother me about the Xs, I didn't think about them myself and things were going pretty normally. But I blew it. The very next day, I blew it. I thought I had myself together. I thought I was okay, but I wasn't.

If I had known that this was what was going to happen, I would never have agreed in the first place. Toothless was planning to stay behind at school and play basketball by himself in the gym, and Ruffnut and I were quite content to leave him there. But then Astrid challenged him to a game, and she told Ruffnut and I that we just had to play, too and of course we agreed. Little, innocent me never suspected a thing could go wrong. My dad was never home early anymore. Actually, correction, he was never home at all. There was no way I was going to get home after he did.

So I went into the gym with the other three, and we were having fun, if only I wasn't so hungry. You see, I hadn't had time to fill in all my mistakes on my sheets today, so I decided, to make up for it that I just wouldn't eat anything for two days. A simple, easy solution

that I thought was pretty smart when I first made the decision. Except that it wasn't.

The first part of the game went okay, nothing worse than a couple stumbles, courtesy of me. But by the second half, I was sweating and shaking, my vision blurry, my legs wobbling beneath me. They just didn't want to hold me up. I tried to push the weakness and the dizziness back. No, the court wasn't spinning if I just didn't look at it, right? It felt like the very earth was tilting under me every time I tried to move.

I decided that I was going to take a breather on the bleachers. "Guys!" I called, trying to get their attention. My voice came out a weak croak, but by some miracle, Toothless heard, and he instantly stopped dribbling the ball, coming over to me with concern. "Are you alright?" He asked. I could feel his fingers gripping my other arm gently, trying to guide me over to the seats. "You look kinda pale."

"I'm okay," I insisted. "I just think I need to sit down for a little while."

Toothless looked pretty darn convinced. "Okay, c'mon."

"I can walk myself."

"You're stumbling."

"I'm fine." I tried to wrench my arm free of his grasp, but the kid was a lot stronger than he looked and I failed, ending up collapsing heavily on him.

His eyes widened. "You're light," he remarked, trying to set me upright.

"Thank you," I responded. "It's a gift."

And then I felt the cool floor of the court beneath me as I suddenly fell, my world turning black, my arm leaving Toothless.

* * *

><p>"I don't even know, he just passed outâ€|"<p>

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"â€|be better offâ€|"

"â€|hospital?"

"â€|Might be bestâ€|"

"How's he doing?"

"â€|okay?"

"What _happened _to him?"

"I don't know!" said a very exasperated voice. "He just sort of passed out on me, Astrid, you've been asking me the same question for

the past thirty minutes!"

"If you two don't stop bickering, you're going to get us thrown out!" a third voice joined in angrily. "And I don't know about you guys, but I'd really rather not leave until the idiot opens his eyes!"

"Really?" I opened one eye and turned to look at the speaker. "Idiot? So flattering. And you could call me so much worse, I'm sure."

"Hiccup!" Ruffnut flew out of her seat and engulfed me in a hug. "What _happened_? You _scared_ us!"

I was a little bit distracted by the fact that she was hugging me and this was the first time a girl had ever done something like that and it was really hard to think around the scent of her shampoo, but I cleared my throat and tried my best. "Umâ€¦well, you tell me, really. I don't know what happened. Where am I?"

"Hospital," Ruffnut replied. "Sorry, we couldn't think where else to take you. We took you to the nurse's office and she was closing down when we arrived with you so, uh, here you are."

I blinked, trying to process her words. My brain was moving slowly and she'd spoken so _fast_â€¦

"Waitâ€¦waitâ€¦hospital?" I repeated, my brain suddenly grinding into motion. "No, get me out of here, let me out!" I reached for the blankets, ripping them off my legs, but Ruffnut just sent me a stern look, putting a calming hand on me.

"Look," she began hesitantly, "they've already taken a bit of a look at you, and we haven't heard back yet."

"Soâ€¦wait, Iâ€¦wait, why did they let you guys back here?"

"Well, immediate family was firstly only allowed to see you," Astrid explained. "So we had a bit of a wait. But they finally let us back here, and we only have a couple minutes, I think they want to check out some stuff with you before your parents come."

"My parents?" I squeaked, brain not working quite right.

"Well, they won't let you out of the hospital until whoever has legal guardianship over you comes to get you," Astrid explained. "So I'm pretty sure they must have already alerted your parents, but I don't know what their response was. Nobody's come to the hospital looking for you is all I know."

Her words seemed to take a long time to get through to me and when they did, it was all I could do not to hyperventilate. _Dad is going to kill me._

"Oh, no," I mumbled to myself. "This is very badâ€¦"

19. Perfectionists and Eating Disorders

****Chapter 19: Perfectionists and Eating Disorders****

**A/N: It's a bit longer, so I hope you all like! I tried making it long. **

* * *

><p>I still remember the day I decided to punish myself. It wasn't some planned thing, some big idea. It just sort of happened. Dad had gone off again, leaving almost no money in the kitchen cabinets for groceries. Mom always left grocery money in the kitchen cabinet above the stove, I remembered that. Dad had wordlessly been leaving as much as he could spare in that little cabinet.<p>

I got home from school that day and I was hungry. I looked around the room for something to eat, but the pantry shelves stood empty and the only thing in the fridge was a wilting head of iceberg lettuce. Dad hadn't done the shopping in I don't know how long, and I decided that I was old enough to begin taking that problem off his hands from time to time. After all, I should do as much as I could for him to make things easier, right?

As I reached for the kitchen cabinet, I saw the X that my father had left on my wrist. The wound had healed, but the memory stung. When I saw that there was nothing except three dusty coins, I drew back in surprise, but I went upstairs and I gave up. Maybe when Dad got home, I'd convince him to do the shopping. Of course, I hadn't been able to convince him to do anything for a very long time.

So I went upstairs and sat on my bed, and before long I found myself staring at the Xs, listening to my stomach growl. And then I fell to thinking about when he'd cut the X into my arm, and wondering what was wrong with me. What was so wrong with me that sometimes my dad had to hit me and yell at me? Why didn't my daddy love me?

I had no one to tell me anything, so I came up with reasons myself. It was because I was stupid, because I didn't have any friends. It was because I wasn't good enough. I was a mistake. I was a freak. I was too hard to take care of.

I talked myself into a state of such self-loathing that day, and when the grumbles of my stomach became louder and louder is when I got my idea. The hunger became painful after a little while, so I let myself get hungrier and hungrier and I didn't eat anything that day because if I went ahead and punished myself, my dad wouldn't have to, right?

That went down the drain two days later, during the next beating. I began eating again, and it was a relief to eat something. At least until it occurred to me after the beating that my dad must have punished me because just one punishment wasn't good enough. I needed to do both, starving myself and taking the beatings. Only I couldn't deny myself food all the time. That had been too painful, and I knew people could die or get really sick from not eating.

So I decided to start a system of Xs. Too many of them and I didn't get to eat the next meal, or even a snack, no matter how hungry I got. That should have kept me in line.

Only it didn't. Nothing can fix a mistake, and I should have known that right from the start.

I was thinking about this day as I listened to Astrid ask me question after question, because I do that sometimes, I think of the strangest things in the worst times. And they kept asking me why I'd passed out, did I have a medical history of passing out, did I feel alright, why did I look so pale—the usual stuff that I expected more from the doctors than from them. Ruffnut's phone played a short jingle a few minutes after Astrid began her constant questioning.

"Oops, that's my parents," she bit her lip guiltily. "I called them and told them I'd be late coming home because my friend was having medical issues."

"What friend?" I asked, looking around the room as if I expected to see whatever friend was having said medical problems.

For the first time since I'd woken up, Ruffnut smiled. And then she laughed. "I'm talking about you, stupid."

"Oh." I blushed. "You—I mean—"

"What?"

I plucked at the thin white blankets, finding myself unable to look at her. "Never mind."

She shrugged, stuck her phone in her jeans pocket, and lifted her backpack onto her shoulders. "I'd better be going, I expect they'll call the police if I don't show up soon. Especially considering they wanted to know all about your 'medical problems'." she sighed, resting a hand on the doorknob. "Bye."

I wanted to ask her if she really meant it, if she was really my friend, but the door swung shut behind her too fast and the moment was gone. And then Astrid began to open her mouth to pepper me with more questions, only the door opened smoothly and the doctor came striding in, a pinched expression on his face, like he was about to ask me some questions he would rather not.

He quietly shooed Astrid and Toothless out, back into the waiting room, where I assumed they'd call their parents to get picked up themselves.

The doctor sat down in one of the chairs beside the bed, scooting it up as close as it would go, his brows drawn down. The ID card dangling from his neck read, 'Dr. Nicholas Montgomery'. "I need to ask you some things about the state of your health."

"I, uh—I figured," I responded honestly, poking at the blankets uncomfortably.

He didn't wait to start in. "Are you getting enough to eat at home?"

I traced the pattern on the blanket with my pinkie finger. "I get enough, yeah."

"You don't skip meals, sometimes?"

"Um—" I couldn't meet his eye. "N-no, not usually."

Should I have lied? I don't know. All I know is that I was freaking terrified, and I was just trying to get through his questions as best I could. What else could I do? I couldn't exactly announce that I never ate because I didn't deserve to. They stick most kids like that in therapy and I was not going to see a therapist.

"Hmmm" he pursed his lips, clearly trying to think of a new tack. "You know, you're severely underweight."

"My body doesn't hang onto nourishment very well," I shrugged. "It's really hard for me to put on weight. My mother had it, too, it's genetic."

"Did she?" he raised an eyebrow, but he didn't seem skeptical, just honestly interested. "Did you have any food today? Anything at all?"

"Um...well..." I squirmed a bit. I really hated lying to people, but over the years I'd gotten so good at it. Why did it bother me to lie so much? "A...a bit, yeah."

"Enough?" he questioned. "Enough to constitute a healthy meal?"

"Uh..." I hesitated on answering.

"Can you tell me if you'd had anything at all to eat in the last forty-eight hours?"

"Um..." Again, I hesitated. "Yeah, I...I had something."

"Something to constitute a healthy meal?"

A chocolate milkshake wouldn't count. "I think so."

Dr. Montgomery paused for a moment in his questions. "Hiccup, I know I'm asking you some personal questions, but I need to know these things. I'm trying to help you. Did you eat anything at all today?"

I couldn't figure out whether or not I wanted to lie, but the moment passed so quickly and I waited so long to answer that I knew he wouldn't accept the one I hated giving, so I just shook my head wordlessly.

He drew a deep breath, nodding. "That's what I thought."

"I'm sorry." My voice came out sounding very small and vulnerable.

"If you're going to apologize to anyone, it shouldn't be to me," he responded quietly. "Apologize to your body for the ordeal you put it through."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Hiccup, have you ever intentionally denied yourself food?"

"N-not really."

"Have you ever thought you needed to lose weight?"

"No." That part was perfectly true, at least.

"Do you ever feel like people would like you more if you didn't eat?"

"I don't have one of those eating disorder things, if that's what you're trying to get at," I was quick to say. "I've never felt the need to lose weight!"

He nodded. "What would you qualify as 'one of those eating disorder things'?"

"I know I don't have one," I responded quickly. "Eating disorders don't happen to people like me." The conversation was not going in the direction I would have hoped. "They happen to people who think they need to lose weight, orâ€|orâ€|" I trailed off, losing steam, but also because speaking just made things worse, just convinced him even more that I was a poor deprived little soul. That was okay, just so long as he didn't try to "fix" me.

He should know that I'm unfixable. There's no cure for a mistake like me.

"Eating disorders come in many forms, actually," he told me gently. "They don't just happen to people who think they need to lose weight. It comes most often in that form, yes, but it can come in many other forms. One of the leading causes in eating disorders is perfectionist traits â€" the feeling that you have to be perfect, and constantly putting pressure on yourself to be."

I remembered the little pep talks I'd give myself before school every day: _"Don't look anyone in the eye. Talking to anyone but teachers will earn you ten Xs per word. Don't force your company on anyone. Answer every question as best you can, and if you ever get anything lower than an A, you don't eat for four days." _

I chewed my lip. "I'm not a perfectionist."

"You don't have to be to have an eating disorder," he responded. "I'm just saying that those traits play a big part in it."

"Well, you don't have to worry because I _don't_ have an eating disorder." Even I recognized the bite in my voice, but I didn't try to control it. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go home."

"We can't let you," he told me softly. "Until one, or both, of your parents or your legal guardian comes to discharge you."

Dad really is going to kill me. No food for a week.

But I absolutely, positively, did _not_ have an eating disorder.

**A/N: OKAY! SO. **

**If you're interested in what I have to say right here, read on! If you're not, just skip because this is going to become a major speech, I can tell. So, have any of you rock fans out there heard Evanescence's 'Lies'? It's a really great song, and also explains why I titled this chapter 'Lies'. That song really reminds me of this story, not just because of the first line, '_bound at every limb by my shackles of fear'. _That was originally what made me think of this story when listening to it, but I've begun to realize that whole verse, especially '_I fight for the chance to be lied to again' _really fits this story. At first, that line didn't make sense to me, because I assumed the '_to be lied to again' _part, and the whole reason as to why they would fight for that chance, would mean that somebody is telling them good things about him or herself. They're being praised, or complimented, or built up, even if they know it's not really true. But upon closer inspection, I've begun to interpret that line a bit differently, because it's followed by, '_You will never be strong enough, you will never be good enough'. _That doesn't make a whole lot of sense if the lies mean that they're being praised, but they don't. The lies mean that they're being torn down, but I think that it means that they've become so used to being torn down that it's just easier to accept the lies as truth, and forget any good things they may once have thought about themselves. I think that's a bit of Hiccup with Stoick in this story - at first, he didn't want to believe that he was a mistake, but after a little while, he just accepted it. **

**Secondly, I know this chapter is horrible. I'm so sorry. **

* * *

><p>The doctor asked me a few more questions, but I found those much easier to answer. Was I exercising before I passed out, was I running really fast, things like that.<p>

The part that I found difficult to manage wasn't the doctors who continually tried to ask me questions about my "eating disorder". I called it punishment, they called it an unhealthy mentality.

The part that was hardest for me was lying to Toothless and the girls. They came over as often as they could, constantly asking me about what had happened, I guess because I didn't give very satisfactory answers.

They were too smart for my lies, and more than that, the words I rehearsed and said so often that they now felt natural just sounded tired, even to my own ears. I was sick of lying to them, although I knew I had to. I knew that the secrets I kept were far more important than anything else in my life, but I couldn't help it â€" a part of me just wanted to quit the stupid lies.

"Did the doctor explain why you passed out?" Astrid persisted.

I pressed my lips together tightly, staring unseeingly up at the ceiling. When I heard her giving a frustrated sigh at my silence, I decided to answer. "Yeah." My voice cracked from lack of use. I hadn't been speaking very much lately. "Yeah, he did."

"Well?" she raised an eyebrow, leaning on the bed railing to look me in the eye.

I shrugged, playing with the blankets, twisting them around my fingers.

"Astrid, he doesn't have to tell you," Toothless gently drew her back, holding onto her upper arm. "You don't have to worry about answering," he began to assure me, but I shrugged. She wouldn't leave me alone until I explained.

"My body has trouble holding onto food in a way that a regular person's doesn't," I tried to be casual about it as I spoke. "And I just forgot to eat a whole lot that day. I overslept, so I didn't have time to get breakfast, and I forgot my homework last night so I did it at lunch and forgot to grab something to eat, then, too."

"Didn't you notice?" Astrid had accepted the excuse, because she looked merely curious now. "I mean, it's kind of hard to forget to eat if you feel hungry. That reminds you that you need food, right?"

"My body doesn't always register when I'm hungry," I shrugged. "My mom had it, too, it's genetic." The lie I told the doctor rolled easily off my tongue, leaving a sour taste.

And they accepted my lies so easily. They went back to talking with me, and Astrid maybe had a concerned look on her face as she spoke, but she didn't try to press me and I was grateful for that. I wanted to make them go away, but at the same time, I had never had anybody express the desire to be with me, and I clung to the feeling. I loved the fact that they seemed to want to be with me.

They couldn't always visit me, though. They were, all three of them, busy enough without worrying about me. Busy with schoolwork and Astrid and Ruffnut were also using their free time to sign up for after school sports. Astrid took track, basketball, volleyball and was hoping to make baseball, while Ruffnut was content with just soccer and volleyball. But Toothless, being Toothless, wasn't involved in anything and spent nearly all his time at the hospital with me, helping me pass the time until Dad came to pick me up. That fear that he would be horribly drunk, and beat me in front of all the doctors and nurses, kept resurfacing, but it was dulled whenever Toothless was with me. He helped me forget the problems I had a lot of the time.

"Soâ€¦" he looked around the all-white room, wrinkling his nose a bit. "Are you ready to leave this winter not-so-much-of-a-wonderland yet?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." I flopped back onto the hospital bed with a bit of a groan, staring up at the smooth tiled ceiling. I even forgot to let that comment signal that my worries about Dad could begin again.

"Why haven't your parents shown up yet?" Toothless asked quietly. "You think at least one of them would be here right now, right?"

And then it came rushing back, the idea that Dad would be drunk when

he came to get me. "Iâ€¦" I trailed off, tracing the pattern on the blanket. "Well, it's just me and my dad, and he was out of town this weekâ€¦I mean, he'll be back soon, he's supposed to come back tonight, but there were gonna be a lot of thunderstorms up in his area, so his flight might be delayed. He may not be back until next week or so instead. You know how these things go."

"Oh." Toothless cleared his throat awkwardly. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"You don't like talking about him."

"What do you mean?" I sat up, suddenly scared to death that something in my voice had given me away.

"You just don't," he responded simply. "You looked upset when you started talking about him."

I was so surprised by his observation that I just sat there silently, not even trying to deny it.

"Anywayâ€¦" Toothless looked around the room for a second, clearly trying to think of a new topic. "Uhâ€¦what did the alien dandelion say to the earth dandelion?"

"Waitâ€¦what?" I turned to him, confused by the sudden change of subject.

"It's a joke," he replied by way of explanation. "What did the alien dandelion say to the earth dandelion?"

"Umâ€¦" I shrugged helplessly.

"Take me to your weeder," he responded.

I rolled my eyes, but I laughed a little. "That was _so_ lame."

"You should hear some of the others I've got," he told me. "They're way worse."

"I think I'll pass," I responded. "That one was enough."

There came a light tap on the door and Toothless started to get up and allow Ruffnut or Astrid, or maybe both, to come inside, but the door opened of its own accord and a nurse with bright red lips and pale blonde hair peered in. She offered us a smile that showed off her unnaturally white teeth and said, "Hiccup, your father's come to discharge you! Isn't that nice?"

21. Denial

****Chapter 21: Denial ****

****A/N: So, um. Yeah. Here you go. I hope you like. Sorry about that superlong AN last time.****

****Hey, have any of you read 'The Forgotten Boy' by TheOneWithTheScar? Oh, my gosh, it's so beautifully angsty, I love every inch! Of**

course, I haven't finished it...I've only read up to chapter...five, I think? I don't know. I must finish it to find out what happens. Anyway, it's really amazing. Seriously, if you guys like angst upon angst - which you should, considering you're reading my story - then you should check it out. **

* * *

><p>I was rendered speechless and frozen for a second, my mouth moving, but no words coming out. I was ten years old again suddenly, my body completely immobile as I waited for someone or something to jar me out of this state, this speechless and shaken state I was in. The same state I was in when Dad hit me for the first time.<p>

The last thing I needed was to remember the first time my dad hit me, but it did do the trick: my voice returned, miraculously, but just in time for me to blurt out the incredibly intellectual answer of, "What?"

The nurse smiled a bit, simply pushing the door a bit wider, allowing a voice I recognized to come floating into the room. And the voice was so familiar that it made tears spring to my eyes, and my heart honestly ached.

"Is this his room?" The voice asked, and I saw the nurse turning to look and nodding at some unseen person, but I knew exactly who it was.

The man who came into the room was not my father.

His face was pale and scared as he stumbled his way into the room, and I caught the barest whiff of alcohol on him, which made my stomach contract, only the scent was a lot weaker than I was used to. It wasn't enough to make me relax, but it was enough to give me hope. He stumbled uncertainly over to the bed, staring down at me as if he couldn't believe I was there. "Hiccupâ€|" he whispered. "What happened?" His voice came out a trembling whisper. And then he did something he hadn't done in a very long time, something I didn't think he would ever do again, something I had never dared to dream he would do: he hugged me. He wrapped me in a tight hug, his chin resting against my forehead, and he kept asking me what had happened, but I didn't want to answer, I just wanted to relax and feel safe in his arms, because he was finally showing me affection.

After four long years of next to nothing, of blows to the head being my lullaby, slaps on the face my kiss goodnight, his yells that I was useless the only 'how was your day' I gotâ€| The only thing I wanted was to keep holding onto this man I hardly knew.

"What happened?" he repeated, drawing away from me.

Toothless was watching the exchange curiously, but his green eyes had darkened with something close to sadness, something close to longing. A longing for something he knew he could never have.

I reveled in the fact that his arms were around me, despite the fact that I expected him to hit me at any second, to realize I didn't deserve hugs. I clung to him, but I wouldn't relax my rigid posture.

The nurse gently tapped him on the shoulder. "Sir?" she ventured cautiously.

He didn't let me go, but he turned away from me to face her, wrapping one arm around me and pulling me close to his side. "Yes?"

"The doctor would like to speak to you and your son privately, if you wouldn't mind," the nurse said quietly, straightening her overlarge black glasses that dwarfed her blue eyes. "Will you stay here for a few moments while I go and fetch him?"

"Of course," he responded, and I could tell he meant it. It was the first time somebody had asked him to do something and he replied with such gratitude in his voice, such relief.

"I'm just gonnaâ€¦" Toothless began to edge towards the door, and the nurse nodded, holding the door for him. "See you tomorrow!" he added and I nodded.

"See you tomorrow," I said quietly.

The moment the door had closed behind him, my dad sniffed a little, and wiped his eyes. I worried that I had made him cry. There are seldom worse feelings in the world than making your parents cry. "Hiccup, when I got that call from the hospital, I was so scaredâ€¦" he hugged me tightly again. "I thought something serious had happened to you!"

"I'm fine," I mumbled, shrugging. "You shouldn't have been so worried."

"What happened to you?" My dad repeated. "I hardly even heard a word the message said after they told me to come discharge you, I was just scrambling around trying to get out the door!"

"I guess I was just exercising too hard." I muttered, staring down at the blankets, trying not to look at him. I think it was even worse lying to him than it was lying to other people. "I'm sorry, I won't do it again."

"Don't apologize." He told me gently. "I just need to know you're okay."

A light tap on the door, and it opened slowly. Dr. Montgomery came in again, running a hand through his graying hair. He looked up at Dad and I, him still with his arms wrapped around me. "Mr.â€¦Haddock, is it?" he cocked an eyebrow, and Dad nodded.

"Excellent," he muttered to himself, taking a seat in one of the chairs and motioning for my dad to do the same. "Hiccup, you can stay in here if you wish, but there's really nothing keeping youâ€¦"

I nodded, but they were kind of blocking the bed anyway, so I just sat there, waiting for him to start speaking.

"Mr. Haddock," he began seriously, "your son passed out from malnutrition four days ago."

I could see the shock and surprise on my dad's face, growing more and more apparent with each word the doctor spoke.

"He confessed to me that he hadn't eaten anything at all on the day in question, and he is horribly underweight as is."

I began picking at the blanket again. It was easier than seeing my dad's face.

"Had you noticed anything unusual in your son's behavior lately?"

Dad shook his head wordlessly, evidently too stunned to speak. But he did speak then, turning to me and regarding me with wide eyes.

"Hiccupâ€|whyâ€|?"

I squirmed. "I'm sorry," I mumbled helplessly. "I didn't mean for things to get this bad, I didn'tâ€|"

The doctor cleared his throat, fiddling with the silver wristwatch on his wrist. "Iâ€|I'm sorry to say this, sir, but I suspect your son has an eating disorder."

This just added to the shock on my father's face.

"No, I don't!" I protested hotly, defensively. "It was just one day, honestly!"

"Hiccup." The doctor closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again. "Whatever this is, you need help in dealing with it."

"I've told you, my body doesn't hold onto food like regular people!"

I think my dad was starting to look a little surprised by how easily the lies rolled off my tongue, instead of by what the doctor was telling him.

"Does your son have a history of that?"

"History of what?"

"A history of being unable to hold onto food?"

Dad wordlessly shook his head. "Notâ€|as far as I can remember," he whispered.

"Well, it must have developed recently." I couldn't meet my father's eyes. I just stared down at my lap.

"Hiccupâ€|"

I pressed my hands into fists, intertwining them tightly. I couldn't sit here and listen to this anymore.

Dr. Montgomery gave me a swift look, one that meant that I should probably shut up now. I reluctantly closed my mouth.

"Mr. Haddock, your son needs help in dealing with what he's got. Even a child could see his body is not healthy. I have several programs, a few clinics that could help himâ€|I have their numbers if you'd like to give them a callâ€|"

"Yes," Dad nodded. "Yes, that would be great. Please, may I have the numbers?"

Dr. Montgomery nodded and I pulled my knees up to my chest, asking myself how I got into these things.

It was a perfectly normal day, and I had passed out. Suddenly, it was a big deal. Suddenly, words like "eating disorder" and "health clinic" and "rehabilitation" were becoming part of my regular vocabulary. They were words the doctors and nurses told me to "think about".

Dr. Montgomery stood and walked to the door. "I'll be right back with them."

When the door closed, my dad didn't look at me for a long second. "An eating disorder?" his voice trembled. "An eating disorder?"

"Dadâ€¦" I felt so helpless. I had let him down again. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Because I was tired of trying to deny things.

"Oh, Hiccup." He let his head fall into his hands, and I thought for a second he was crying, but when he raised his face again his eyes were dry. His expression twisted, and he looked indescribably angry. "An _eating disorder_?"

"I'm sorry." I could feel tears building in my eyes. "I'm so sorry, I never meant for this to happen, I never meant for things to get this badâ€¦"

"Isn't that what women have?" he asked bluntly, all the sadness gone from his face, and I felt a sudden spasm of hurt, as if he'd just smacked me on the heart instead of on the face.

"Wellâ€¦umâ€¦the doctor said it could happen to all gendersâ€¦people of all ages, but people in their teen years were most susceptibleâ€¦" I shrugged helplessly.

My dad sighed a little. "How did it get this way? And why didn't _you tell me_?"

"Iâ€¦I don't know." I wanted suddenly to tell him that it was because he was never there, that I needed him there, that I needed him to stop hitting me and stop calling me mistake and start taking care of me again and start doing the shopping like a regular parent. I wanted to tell him that I wanted him to show that he cared about me, but the words stuck in my throat. I couldn't accuse him of never being there, because who would ever want to be there for me, anyway?

22. Broken Vow

****Chapter 22: Broken Vow ****

****A/N:** This chapter is based off a poem I wrote entitled 'Broken Vow'. So, you get this. I really am not fond of anything in this chapter, except maybe the accuracy of the drugs and stuff. But I feel I threw a random creepy guy in there. Also, I fed my plant the other day. I named it Jack. After Jack Frost. He looks like he's got little

frost on his leaves, so I call him Jack. I fed him. He seemed to like that, because he looked a bit more lively afterwards. I'm really glad I bought the food. **

* * *

><p>The moment we were outside under the gray sky (seriously, how much rainfall did Berk get?) Dad's whole demeanor changed. His grip on me tightened, twisting my arm behind my back.<p>

"Ow," I choked. "Dad, please stop, you're hurtingâ€"

"Hiccup." His voice was low in my ear, but it instantly shut me up. "Just get in the goddamn car."

Too scared to say anything, even try to bring back the kind man who had entered the hospital, I crawled carefully into the passenger seat, my hands shaking as I tried to buckle my seatbelt. The hard metal pieces just didn't seem to want to fit together.

Dad didn't bother with a seatbelt, merely sat down in the driver's seat, put the car in reverse, and we slammed backward.

The next forty minutes were, I am not kidding, a blur of pure terror.

He swerved wildly from lane to lane, yelling obscenities at every car that honked its horn indignantly or veered suddenly to avoid him. I clutched the sides of my seat with a white-knuckled grip, praying to every deity I knew that he would realize the speedometer was well over one hundred.

"Slow down!" I begged, my words sounding oddly quiet against the background of my pounding heart. "Dad, please, you're going way too fast!"

He slammed suddenly on the brakes. "Shut up, Hiccup!" he yelled, reaching out like he was about to smack me, his eyes strangely glazed, the pupils dilated. He had never looked like that before. "Shut up!"

I shrank back instinctively from his hand, but my stupid mouth kept moving. "No, Dad, _please_, you're not wearing a seatbelt! At least buckle yourself in!"

He did smack me then, and I drew back even further in my seat, feeling tears of pain spring to my eyes. I let my fingers explore the rapidly forming welt instead of doing so with my vision, because I was afraid if I spotted my reflection, I would cry.

"Now, shut up!" He stepped on the gas again, and a car honked loudly behind us. As said car pulled up beside us instead, Dad flipped him off before switching lanes in a sudden swerving motion.

My stomach lurched right along with the car. "Be careful!" I begged, fear suddenly clutching at my heart. "If we crashâ€"

"I _know_ what I'm doing, Hiccup!" he roared, but it didn't seem like it. "Just shut up!"

By the time we reached home, I was still clutching my seat in fear, white and trembling, too frightened to even move. It felt more like a roller coaster than an actual car ride.

Dad practically had to drag me out of the car and up the steps.

The moment we entered our house, I knew why he hadn't come to discharge me — he hadn't been out of the house while I was in the hospital. It's just that other people had been here. I could see the evidence in the beer cans and cigarettes strewn around, but the things that caught my eye weren't those: it was the little bags, the empty pill bottles, the traces of white powder on the table, the needles. I could only stare at the paraphernalia for a couple seconds, and then it just suddenly came crashing down. Let me make this clear, so you understand the significance of what I was seeing: my. Dad. Has. Never. Done. Drugs. Not once.

"That was somebody else's, right?" I asked uncertainly as he dragged me into the kitchen, staring me down. My heart clenched when I saw he was glaring down at me and I suddenly regretted speaking.

He didn't answer me, but he didn't need to. My house had been shelter for people who were stoned out of their minds before, and I recognized that look on his face, the look that meant he was beyond my reach, the look all drugged people had. And then, as the shock slowly passed, I felt like crying. Not just for myself, out of fear of what he was going to do to me, but also for him, because I had watched him.

You'll never understand, because you haven't lived with him for four years. You have not watched him walk through the front door, the only time he ever comes home that month, and you'll never understand why I nearly dropped to my knees and prayed that he'd be sober. Not just for my sake, but for his. Because it was killing me to watch him drink so much. He had friends over once, a couple other drinkers, just like him. I remember that time, because he tried to shoo me away upstairs before they saw me, but one of them asked if I'd ever had alcohol, if I was "following in the footsteps of my old man". He asked it proudly, like he assumed I was. Like he assumed I wanted to be an alcoholic, just like Dad. I loved my father. I loved him so much it hurt. But I wasn't going to become an alcoholic for him.

And then when he heard that I hadn't tried alcohol, he sat me down and gave me a glass. I still remember whispering no thank you, trying to politely push the glass away.

I remember my father going white with suppressed anger. "Just take a damn sip, Hiccup," he hissed between clenched teeth.

I stared down at the swirling liquid, and I very hesitantly raised the glass, hating myself the whole time. The bitter taste filled my mouth and I instantly set the glass down, thinking it wouldn't be very manly of me to spit out. The man who had insisted I try some roared with laughter at my expression. "Go on, sonny," he urged me. "It's a bit of an acquired taste, I'm sure you'll get used to it if you just keep drinking."

I hated every bit of what I was doing, but with my father glowering down at me, I emptied the glass, and it was a pretty large one, too.

The moment I was away, safely upstairs, I locked myself in the bathroom and vomited it right back up.

I remember sitting there on the linoleum floor and I hugged my knees to my chest. And I couldn't help but think, _I drank alcohol, I drank alcohol, I broke that promise that I wouldn't. I promised myself I'd never drink, and I broke that promise. _

The floor felt so cold to me as I lay down on it, and I remember staring up at the glaringly bright lights above me, wanting nothing more than to go to sleep, but the pounding headache and awful nausea let me know that my stomach wasn't done emptying its contents. And I remember hating myself that night, because I was so afraid I was going to end up just like my father. I had watched him fall so far in just four short years that even though I loved him, I didn't want to end up like him, drinking and mourning his failed dreams. I didn't ever want to hit my child or taste alcohol ever again. I remember falling asleep on the bathroom floor and waking up to one his friends opening the door and coming in there, only they weren't interested in going to the bathroom, they were just interested in finding a place to shoot up, so he just pulled out his needles and did his business. I pretended I was asleep and that I couldn't see or hear him, but eventually, I guess it just got to me, that he was throwing his life away by using that needle, so I kind of cried a little, for myself and my father and for this random stranger I didn't know, but who I felt sorry for.

And I guess he must've heard me crying, because before he could stick the needle in, he paused and looked down at me. "You okay, kid?" His voice wasn't raspy or rough, the way I expected an addict's to be; rather, it was gentle, and soft.

I rose up on my elbows, embarrassed that he was seeing my tears. "Yeah, I'mâ€¦I'm okayâ€¦" I wiped my eyes using the sleeve of my jacket, which even then was too small for me.

To my surprise, he didn't shrug it off and give himself another fix; he set his needle down on the bathroom counter, knelt down next to me, and gently tugged me up by the arm. "This isn't a place for a kid," he said quietly. "What are you doing here?"

"This is my house." I sniffed, wiping my eyes and then suddenly I just sort of told him a little bit, like how my dad would drink a lot and how he had random strangers coming to the house, getting drunk or high or trying to make me drunk or high. I had turned down four lines of coke just trying to get to my room, I told him, and that was the truth.

And his eyes kind of softened, and beneath the bloodshot look, they were kind and soft. Despite the fact that he looked rough, like he lived in a cardboard box on the side of the road, he also looked kind. He didn't try to make me feel better, or offer empty words of comfort. He just whistled, long and low. "Life has dealt you quite the shitty hand of cards, kid."

"Yeah, tell me about it." I wiped my nose with my sleeve. "Why do you _do_ it?"

"Do what?"

"Why do you keep doing that to yourself?" I pointed to the needle on the counter. "I've seen it firsthand, and honestly, once you get into something as serious as that, there's really no way out."

He asked me which room was mine. I pointed my bedroom out to him, and he carefully brought me in there, but he didn't answer my question. He left the bathroom door open, so a sliver of light crept along the carpeted floor to my bedroom. I eased the door open and peeked out, wondering if he was still going to do it. The needle glinted in the light as he pressed it into his skin.

23. Count on Me

****Chapter 23: Count on Me ****

****A/N: PLEASE READ ****

****I HAVE NOT SEEN HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2. DO NOT TELL ME ANY SPOILERS FROM THE MOVIE. DO NOT LEAVE REVIEWS ASKING MY OPINION ON THE MOVIE. JUST DON'T TELL ME ABOUT THE MOVIE. I WILL BE SEEING IT SOMETIME SOON, I HOPE, BUT FOR RIGHT NOW, THAT'S NOT AN OPTION. ****

****Secondly, I know this chapter is horrible. I'm sorry. I was going to dedicate it to a friend who's having a hard night, but I think she'd just be insulted that I bestowed upon her such a horrible thing, so I shall not drag her into this. She deserves to be left out of my failures. I'm really sorry. ****

*** * ***

><p>I knew the drill whenever my dad looked at me in that way, so the first blow wasn't that big of a surprise. I hit the ground and covered my head with my arms, wishing with everything in me that he would stop and realize what he was doing. Didn't blood count for anything in his brain anymore? Didn't any part of him still register that he used to love me? That I used to matter to him, to someone, that I used to not be a mistake?<p>

I used to be loved, and now I don't even know what that word means. I don't even know what it means to be loved anymore. Who could ever love me anyway?

"An eating disorder?!" Dad bellowed, bringing me sharply back to reality. "I thought I had a son, not a daughter!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"You should be!"

"I'm sorry!" I choked weakly, because the only thing I could do was be sorry, I couldn't fix it, because I could only make mistakes, not fix them. Tears sprang to my eyes, from the pain in my body and the pain in my heart. I sniffled a little, and the small noise made Dad's fists cease their constant hammering for just a moment. He stared down at me for a second, uncomprehending. And then he scowled. "ARE YOU CRYING?!"

I couldn't look at him, but I tried to shake my head no as I wiped

away the tears with my sleeve.

"That's just perfect!" he cried angrily. "I really did have a daughter! Real men don't cry!"

And he didn't seem to realize it, but this really only made me cry harder. "I'm sorry!" I sobbed. "I'm sorry!"

"Come here!" He ordered me, and he grabbed me by the arm, jerking me up and over to the front door. He fumbled with the latch for a few seconds, but I didn't dare to try and help him.

When he finally opened the door and shoved me outside, he slammed the screen shut and locked it instantly afterwards, as if afraid I would try and spring back in.

"You can stay out here," he yelled, "until you learn how to be a man!" And then he slammed the door in my face as the rain began to pick up.

Even though I knew the experience was supposed to help be a man, I just couldn't stop crying until I'd been outside for about an hour. During the second hour, I just lay down on my back in the grass and stared up at the rain, watching it fall. The third hour was spent thinking about just how much I hated rain. The fourth was spent ruing my lack of jacket. The fifth, I stood up and began to walk out of my yard, thanking God that the rain appeared to be finally clearing up. I was soaked to the skin and shivering from cold, but at least, if the sun came out, I'd be able to dry off. I tentatively walked up to our door and knocked, but no answer came.

I gave up after waiting a good twenty minutes for him to answer, and then I began to walk. I don't really know where I was going or what I planned on doing when I got there — I just walked. I left our neighborhood, watching the setting sun begin to disappear behind the trees. It would have been a sight if I had been in the mood to see my only light disappearing, but I wasn't. I hoped there'd be a moon tonight, so I'd have a little light. But where would I sleep? Fear crept in, real fear. Dad had done this before, locking me out of the house until he calmed down enough to see me again, but this time he wasn't letting me back in after his normal maximum of four hours, which was unsettling. I wasn't sure if he would let me back in at all, but for now, I just walked.

I walked past shops and restaurants, hardware stores, grocery stores, little cafes all lit up, advertising that they were open until two a.m. tonight. I sighed and turned away from them, but the dark trees on the other side of the road didn't look too inviting, either. When I looked ahead and spotted the ice cream shop, neon pink letters spelling out 'Sweet Tooth' over the pale green shutters, I smiled a little, remembering the two times I had been talked into going there. More than anything, I longed to be doing that again, sitting in the shop with my — no, not friends — the people who could at least tolerate me. I longed to be sitting with them, laughing and having a good time, hearing Astrid and Toothless argue about whether blackberry ice cream was actually any good, and just rolling my eyes at their antics. I longed to hear Toothless' voice at my ear, telling me a lame joke to cheer me up, to see the concerned look disappear from Astrid's blue eyes. I slowly pushed open the door to the shop, hearing the little bell 'ding' as I walked in.

As I walked over to one of the tables, I saw Heather, with her bright red lips and black hair, looking over at me questioningly, so I went over to the counter and took a seat at one of the stools.

"Hey, mister," she grinned, laying a hand on the countertop as she looked at me. Her nails were painted bright red. "Haven't seen you around lately."

I shrugged, staring down at the marble surface. "I've been busy."

"Uh-huh." She looked unimpressed. "Did I really give you my number for nothing?"

I was surprised to find a smile creeping onto the corners of my lips. "No, you didn't. I just—" I traced a pinkie along one of the dots on the counter. "I'm sorry."

She gave me a long, searching look. "Hmm—do you want anything?" she gestured to the glowing neon bar behind her, advertising all the different ice cream flavors.

I shook my head, intending to just say no, but the truth somehow came tumbling out, embarrassing as it was. "I don't have the money."

She clucked her tongue in sympathy. "Boy, I know what that's like. I got this job just to pay for food."

"You did?" I glanced up, surprised.

"Parents kicked me out when I was fifteen," she replied without batting an eye. "I was left with no income, so I did what I had to do. Hold on."

She disappeared behind the counter and I heard her calling out a couple orders. When she got back, her smile was back in place. "Anyway, what's the point in talking about them, anyway? They're not worth thinking about." She grabbed up a stray black pen off the counter and shoved it in her pocket. "Anyway, what brings you here, without your friends?"

I shrugged. "They're just not available right now."

Her eyes seemed to radiate more sympathy than I wanted, but luckily, she disappeared behind the counter a few minutes later. She returned with a chocolate milkshake in one hand a stack of napkins in the other. She slid the cup across the counter towards me, and I pushed it back. "Heather, I can't pay," I told her. "I just said that."

"No, I know," she nodded. "It's on me. See?" she pulled the right amount of money right out of her pocket and put it in the cash register.

"I—I can't accept—"

She pointed wordlessly to the napkins.

I looked down at them and found the words, written in black Sharpie,

just like last time: _1-800-CHEER-UP _

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help but smile. "Is this even an actual number?"

"Of course," she responded. "Calling mine could do wonders for your mood, too, but shy is pretty cute."

I felt myself beginning to blush. "Uhâ€"

"Take your time," she waved a hand on me. "I'll let you know if the number changes, okay?"

"At least I can count on you," I commented with a bit of a laugh.

"Yep," she responded, leaning across the counter to look at me. "At least you can count on me."

24. Home

****Chapter 24: Home****

****A/N:** So, this chapter title is horrible, but I actually like the chapter. Also, you know what I just realized? I have like, three folders, all for separate fandoms and the fanfiction I write for them: I have "HTTYD writing" "RotG writing" and "The Lorax writing" and HTTYD is the fullest xD same with pictures. I have the most in HTTYD. I don't know, I just think I enjoy that movie more than the others. I really do like the other two, though. And of course Brave and Tangled. Also, for those of you who have been waiting with bated breath for news of my plant, Jack, he is doing great, actually. He looks a lot better. But he needs lots of sunlight. ******

* * *

><p>For a moment, there was silence between us, and then Heather's smile faded. She pulled away slightly, a frown tugging at her lips. "What happened to your face?"<p>

"What?" My hand flew instantly from the counter to my cheek, feeling around for anything out-of-place. When my fingers found the swollen welt, I flushed slightly. "I don't know what you mean, Iâ€"

"You don't look the type to get into a fight," she responded, almost as if I hadn't spoken. She crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow, silently asking me what had happened.

I wanted to respond with something snappish and mean, like the fact that it was none of her business, but something stopped me. Somehow, I managed to shrug. "I'm really clumsy."

She uncrossed her arms, but a hint of amusement did enter her eyes. "What'd you do, walk into a door?"

Even though she was being funny, I latched onto her response for an explanation. "Yeah, yeah, I did, actually. Well, I didn't _walk_ into it, somebody else opened it while I was standing too close andâ€"

Heather laughed unexpectedly. "Don't tell me the door beat you up _that_ badly."

"Umâ€¦kind of," I admitted, feeling strangely guilty for the lie. I was used to feeling guilty when lying to adults, but never to kids my age.

"I know it's terrible to laugh," she admitted, but the grin was still curling up her mouth. "I'm sorry, I know it's really terrible, it looks so painfulâ€¦"

The bell dinged suddenly and Heather glanced around, spotting another customer. "I'm sorry, hereâ€¦we're short a worker, so I've got to go handle this guyâ€¦" she swept away from me, calling out, "Welcome to Sweet Tooth! What can I do for you?"

Relieved to have been released from the conversation, but also surprising myself by feeling slightly disappointed, I slid off my stool, dumped the milkshake in the trash and slipped her napkins in my pocket. A few more nights of this, and I'd have a choice of numbers to call, I thought to myself. I pushed the exit open and walked outside, into the cold night air that stung my face when I breathed in.

And now the hard part â€" finding a place to spend the rest of the night.

I had never done this before. My dad did sometimes get angry, but he never left me outside for longer than four hours or so. He always opened the door for me after that time period. But since he hadn't tonight, and since it was now fully dark out, I didn't have high hopes that he would. In fact, he had probably left our house again, but I doubted that he'd left the door unlocked. I began trudging through neighborhoods, trying not to cut through more backyards than I had to as I walked.

I probably would have kept going and found some place to sleep, a park bench or something like that, if I hadn't spotted a familiar face in one of the neighborhoods I walked through.

If you had asked me what kind of neighborhood I thought Toothless lived in, it wouldn't have been one like this. This neighborhood was nice. No, it was better than nice. It was gated-community nice. Don't ask me why I'd been expecting him to live in a mobile home that was slowly falling apart, but he just seemed tooâ€¦normal to live in a place like this.

Although it was twilight, he was still out there in the front yard with a basketball, and I noticed he kept passing the ball to the two little kids in the yard beside him.

The front door opened suddenly, spilling a streak of golden light from their front room onto the lawn. "Toothless? You three need to come in, now, it's getting dark out."

"We'll be right there, Aunt Cassie," Toothless said, over the chorus of groans from the two kids. "Come on," he urged them, "if you two come inside, like good little children, I'll tell you a story!"

It was as if they had won the lottery. The little girl hugged Toothless' legs and cried, "Really?!" and the boy squealed in delight.

"Finish the story about the dragons!" The little girl ordered.

"Yeah, yeah, the Night Fury dragon!" The boy added excitedly. "What happened to him?"

Toothless raised an eyebrow. "Well, I guess you guys will find out, if you go inside and take your baths and brush your teeth!"

The boy grinned and raced for the door, his sister hot on his heels. I smiled slightly to myself as I watched the three of them interact. They were so obviously family that it was nice.

Toothless flicked his hair out of his dark green eyes before they shifted over to me and he jumped about a foot in the air. "Hiccup! Ohâ€|hi, Hiccup." he waved awkwardly, a dark red blush beginning to steal over his face.

I tried not to notice how embarrassed he looked as I greeted him. "Soâ€|a Night Fury dragon, huh?"

He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously. "They're, umâ€|obsessed with dragons."

Judging by the sparkle in his green eyes when he'd been promising a story, they weren't the only ones. "Clearly," I responded.

He cleared his throat and inspected his dirty Converse sneakers. I wasn't even sure how you could see what color they were supposed to be beneath the dirt and doodles, but, to each his own. "Anyway, what are you doing here?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Just walking around." The four-story house behind him captured my attention once again. I just couldn't quite connect the beautiful building to the boy with the ratty clothes in front of it, with the basketball in his hands.

The door opened again, and the woman looked out in annoyance. "Toothless, I thought I just told you to comeâ€|oh. Who's this?" She slowly descended the brick steps, looking me up and down.

"This is Hiccup." Toothless tilted his head at me. "You know, that kid I was telling you about. Hiccup, this is my aunt."

The woman's eyes softened unmistakably and I realized Toothless had actually spoken of me to his parents and relatives. "Why don't you come in?" she offered, gesturing to the door.

At my hesitation, she added, "Unless you're expected at homeâ€|"

I sighed a little to myself, wanting so badly to speak a lie and make it real through sheer force of will, but I didn't. I spoke the truth. "No." I admitted in a whisper. "No, I'm notâ€|"

****Chapter 25: Hopeless****

****A/N:** Well, here's the newest chapter! I would like to apologize for my long absence. During that long absence, see, I started and finished Camp Nano Wrimo, and wrote thirty k on it :) And, I also just freaking realized that this story is godawful. But I felt I owed it to you guys to pull something out, no matter how horrible it was. I hope this is okay.**

****Oh,** also, I say Hiccup was absent for two days, and he was only absent from school on Monday and Tuesday, because he collapsed on Friday, so he spent the weekend in the hospital, and his father got him on Tuesday, about late afternoon. So it is now Wednesday morning :) ******

* * *

><p>Toothless' house was about as far from mine as you could possibly get. The living room was large, with wooden floors that had been polished until they literally gleamed, and a wide staircase with the little boy from the backyard running up them, tripping all over himself.<p>

"Be careful!" Toothless called up to him, and the boy nodded once before disappearing into one of the bathrooms. I heard the water start up from the tub after a few minutes, and Toothless led me into the kitchen. He barely seemed to notice the grandeur of his quarters, but all I could do was stare. This place was nothing like my house.

My house was dark and empty and quiet. There was almost never anybody inside, unless you counted me, studiously counting my Xs and never eating and telling myself that I would be perfect if I could just change. If I could just fix something about the awful sight I saw whenever I looked in the mirror, things would be better. In this house, people were all over the place, tripping on the stairs and running each other over and laughing about it. The smell of something baking hit me, and my stomach lurched with how much I wanted food.

And I knew then, the moment my stomach twisted, I knew that I couldn't stay. I took a few steps back from Toothless. "I'm sorry, I can't do this. I just remembered that my dad's expecting me, soâ€¦"

No. My dad was not expecting me. But what did another lie really matter?

Toothless looked sort of disappointed, and I couldn't figure that out, because he should have been relieved, but all I knew was that I had to get away.

His aunt appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, holding a platter of some kind of dessert. I couldn't tell what it was supposed to be, but I put a hand protectively over my stomach, warning myself not to show a sign of hunger. Whatever that food was, I didn't deserve it.

"Leaving so soon?" she asked, setting the platter down on the edge of

the table. "Well, the weather says there'll be scattered thunderstorms tonight, so at least let me drive you home."

"No, that's okay" I tried to say, because I wasn't actually allowed in my house anymore, but she had those soft eyes and that kind look again, and I knew she wasn't taking no for an answer.

As I crawled reluctantly into the passenger seat, mumbling my thanks, she turned the key in the ignition.

"Oh, it's cold," she whispered to herself, turning on the heat. Warm air rushed from the vents, and I sank down in my seat, drinking in the warmth. Though the rain had long since stopped, my clothes still weren't completely dry. Remembering how much rainfall we were supposed to get tonight, I shivered a little. I really, really didn't want to sleep outside.

"Are you cold?" she asked sympathetically, turning to look at me as she backed out of the drive. "How long were you out in that rain? You're wet!" It was as if she had just noticed this, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why she cared.

"It's nothing," I replied quickly, pulling the sleeves down as far as they would go, both to lock in warmth and to hopefully hide the 'X' on my arm. I didn't want her to see that. "I just took a walk out in the rain, and couldn't find my way back home."

Toothless' aunt looked kind of pitying. "Well, I'll help you find it. Speaking of which, where is your home?"

"Um, I live on Dragon Whisperer's Way" I began uncertainly, but stopped myself when I heard her make a strange noise in the back of her throat. "What's wrong?"

"Over there?" It was then that I realized just how far my neighborhood must have been from this one.

"I'm sorry," I said miserably, shrinking down in my seat and staring at my hands. "I didn't mean to be any trouble"

"Oh, no, you're fine, I didn't mean" she kind of sighed and started down the road, making a wide arc as she finally pulled out of the neighborhood. I sat back against the fake leather seat, staring out into the darkening sky and feeling more miserable than ever.

* * *

><p>The night wasn't that fun, but I survived. Mostly, I just tried not to think about it the next morning at school. I didn't sleep half the night, because I tried to sleep on a park bench, and I kind of dozed for an hour or so, but then a police officer who seemed to like to call me 'sonny' told me that I apparently wasn't allowed to sleep there. So, mostly I got up and walked around, looking for places to sleep that weren't illegal. I didn't find a whole lot, so I ended up sleeping on the sidewalk and waking up again at about four o' clock, when I decided to give the house another shot, because it was raining. It had been locked when Toothless' aunt first drove me there, and Dad's car had still been in the drive, so I didn't dare enter then, but it started pouring rain when I woke up on the sidewalk, so I walked home fighting tears.<p>

I know it was weak, but I just felt like collapsing on the ground and crying. I'd cried way too much earlier that day, though, so I just pushed them back and tried to find home. I wandered around, hopelessly lost, until about six, when I finally stumbled across my neighborhood, and tried the door. It was unlocked, and Dad was gone. I stumbled into the house, almost crying with relief as I stripped off my wet clothes, used the bathroom and took a shower. The water was warm and soft, so unlike the rainwater that had been pelting me hard all day. I scrubbed myself as hard as I could with the soap, trying not just to remove all the dirt accumulated from the night, but also every memory as well. I stepped out of the shower, dried myself off and pulled on the only other pair of jeans I owned that still fit.

I thought about school, and how much I really didn't want to go. I felt like crawling in bed and sleeping, but I remembered my own advice to myself: never miss a day. I couldn't afford to get behind, not even by a day, because Dad would get a call from the school, and he'd want to know why I stayed home, and I'd have nobody to blame but myself, because it was my own stupid fault that my dad locked me out of the house. I was sure that when he came home to signs that I had been here, he would regret unlocking the door for me before he left. I swallowed, ran my fingers through my hair, grabbed up my backpack and left the house. The rain was mostly drying up, and all I could think was how glad I was, how much I hated it. I had had enough experiences with storms to last me quite a long time.

And when I got to school, people stared. They pointed. They whispered.

"That's Hiccup."

"That one who collapsed in the gym?"

"I think that's him."

"He's all bruised!"

"He just hit the floor pretty hard, I betâ€¦!"

"No, you idiot, he's been out for two days, that bruise is new!"

I flinched inwardly at their comments, positioning my bangs in front of my eyes, hoping that would stop any questions.

But hope and I didn't really get along that well. I had hoped that I wouldn't be a mistake one day, and that hope hadn't gotten me anywhere. I had hoped that I'd one day have friends, but I realized now that I didn't deserve them. And I'd hoped that one day my father would love me.

And that was never, ever going to happen.

26. Self-Portrait

****Chapter 26: Self-Portrait****

****A/N: Okay. I know you guys don't like me putting myself down, but I**

have to say this: this chapter made me freaking cringe. I was proud of it when I started it, but it just got worse and worse. Oh, God. I'm so sorry. If you like it, great. If you don't, I don't blame you. Well, I mean, I guess I kinda see where it has merit, but it could definitely use improvement.**

* * *

><p>The teachers were kind of overly nice to me in almost every class, but the one that it was hardest to tell in was art. Ms. Delaney was just kind of super nice to everybody, no matter who they were, so she was always pretty friendly. She smiled at me when I first walked in, and then frowned when I absently brushed the hair out of my eyes, revealing the bruise on my face from where my father had smacked me the previous night. I kept my eyes fixed on my desk as I pulled my sketchbook out, a little knot of anxiety pulling tight in my stomach.<p>

I swallowed as I flipped to a blank sheet, staring down at the last drawing I'd done. The one of light. I had had hope that day, hope that things could be better. I didn't deserve hope, though. Maybe it was better that I didn't hope. Nothing good ever came of my hoping. I picked up my pencil, remembering her excitement about our prompt project. I hoped this one would be something simple, because at least then I wouldn't really have to think when I drew. I was tired of feeling when I drew something. I decided that I didn't want to feel anything anymore when I did.

Ms. Delaney kept kind of frowning at me until everybody had filed in, but then she took her eyes off of me and grinned really widely at the class, clapping her hands together. "Good morning, class!"

"Good morning, Ms. Delaney!" A couple students greeted her.

She smiled at them before pulling out that sheet of pink and purple. "Okay, remember last time, guys? Our prompt project? Sure you do. Okay, the prompt for today isâ€|self-portrait. Now, these prompts might also be used for writers, but, as aspiring artists, I want you all to sit back, take a moment and really think about yourself. Don't just start drawing whatever you see in the mirror. Draw what you're like, I mean really like, on the inside as well as the outside. To thine own self be true," she quoted before smiling again. "Now, we have about an hourâ€|let's go!"

Everybody else began pulling out sketchbooks and sinking down into their chairs, reflecting on what sort of self-portrait they wanted to draw. Me, I already knew what I looked like. I slowly pulled my book closer to me, feeling that tight knot pulling again. It felt like there was a truck standing on my chest. Anxiety coursed through me, making it hard to breathe the moment I put the pencil down on the page. I really just wanted to ignore Ms. Delaney, and draw the face reflected back at me in the mirror, but the problem was, I didn't even know what I looked like there, either. So I just began to draw this instead, knowing I wouldn't have time to convey what I truly was in the space of an hour, but deciding to give it my best shot.

I began to draw. I listened as the other kids slowly picked up their pencils and began to draw, too, but I barely paid them any attention. The pencil was shaking in my hand, and I still felt like curling into a ball and crying from everything that had happened last night and

this morning. The memories kept passing in front of my eyes like a slideshow. Me sitting in the hospital bed, tensing when my father entered the room. My father hugging me in concern, but turning it into something violent and ugly the moment we were outside. Him smacking me across the face, me seeing the speedometer's needle going much farther than it should have, watching the landscape fly by out the windows.

I looked down at my arm for a split second, rolling up the sleeve a little as I remembered his iron grip. Yes, there were finger marks. If anybody else had looked over in that moment, they would have seen. I marked a tiny 'X' on the drawing. And it was then that I realized that it was completely stupid of me to be drawing at all, for me to like it, because art was beautiful.

Art was beautiful, no matter what, and I was not. Maybe, when I had a regular family, with a regular mom and dad, I was beautiful. But my father had hit me since then, and shoved me down flights of stairs and yelled at me to never call him 'Daddy' again, and now I was ugly. I had turned ugly the day he'd hit me. The day I'd become unlovable to him was the day I'd become ugly.

And the thought made me realize that drawing was a stupid practice, because how could I take something as ugly and scary as my life, and turn it into something beautiful with just paper and pencil?

This was the thought that made me snap.

I clenched my hand into a fist, practically ripping the page out of the sketchbook. I stared down at it for a long second, all those Xs scrawled along the page, myself standing in the center of them, surrounded by broken bottles and Xs and broken things, and I didn't fit in with any of them because I wasn't broken, just stupid and unfixable, and I burst into tears. In that moment, I just suddenly felt as ugly as all the blows should have made me feel before, but the feeling of ugliness hadn't quite hit until that moment. I put my head on my desk, trying to quell the sobs because I didn't want anybody to know I was crying. And I really wanted to stand up and run from the room, only people were already talking about me and I didn't want to give them any more fuel, and I didn't want any more attention. And I also considered the merits of asking for a bathroom pass, but the thought was exhausting and so I just kept sitting there for a few long minutes until I heard a soft voice.

"Hiccup? Hiccup, honey, are you okay?"

I slowly rose from the desk, not daring to look Ms. Delaney in the eye in case my eyes or nose was red. I tried to surreptitiously dry my eyes on the edge of my sleeve, only then I caught sight of my crumpled drawing again, and I began crying all over again.

So I just shook my head, and that was probably the most honest I had ever been with anyone. I sensed people staring at me, and I knew there'd be rumors, but right then, I just couldn't help it, and I couldn't stop crying. I'd gotten so good at holding back tears when my dad first started beating me really badly, so I couldn't really understand why I was so upset, and why I couldn't stop crying, but fragmented, disjointed words kept running through my mind. Broken unfixable broken X stupid X mistake X stupid idiot beating dad love hate perfect imperfect unfixable alcohol beating beating Toothless

Toothless Astrid Ruffnut Dad Dad Dad Dad Da mistake mistake unfixable. _

These words just made me cry harder, and I heard Ms. Delaney saying in a calm, collected voice, "Class dismissed."

I guess a few students must have tried to linger, because she added, rather sharply, "I mean it. Class dismissed, get out of here." I had never heard her speak an angry word to anyone, and hearing it made me feel scared and small and helpless. What if she was mad at me for crying like this? What if I had made a mistake by crying? I shouldn't have caused such a scene. Dad wasn't here to punish me. Was she going to?

"Hiccup," she whispered when the door had finally shut behind the last student. Her voice was back to that gentle tone. "Hiccup, look at me."

Only I couldn't.

"Hiccup, please."

I peeked hesitantly up at her. Her brown eyes were warm, soft, caring. The lump in my throat was hard to swallow. I wished my dad's eyes were like that.

Ms. Delaney brushed my hair back from my eyes, her touch so warm and comforting. Right then, she reminded me of my mother. "What's going on? Talk to me."

I shook my head.

And then she did the most unexpected thing, the thing I had never thought anybody was ever going to do to me again. She hugged me.

This made my eyes open wide, and then it made me cry harder. "Howâ€|how do you do that?" I sobbed, trying to wipe at my eyes and not cry all over her, because she was a teacher, not a therapist.

"How do I do what?" she whispered.

"How can you t-touch me when I'mâ€|I'mâ€|" I gestured to myself, and Ms. Delaney shook her head. She looked like she was about to cry, too. I hated that I did that to her. I made everybody cry. I was such a mistake. I couldn't do anything right.

"When you're what?" she whispered, brushing my hair back out of my eyes.

More tears spilled from my eyes. "When I'm me."

She really did start crying then, a few tears escaping from her own eyes, but she just shook her head at me. "There's nothing wrong with being you, Hiccup." Ms. Delaney reached into her pockets and fumbled with them for a few minutes, obviously searching for something. It took her a few minutes, but eventually she handed me a purple handkerchief.

As I slowly and reluctantly dabbed at my eyes with it, wiping it along my cheeks, she asked softly, "What happened to you, Hiccup? Where did you get that bruise?"

I shook my head, and didn't respond. I couldn't. I felt like I was frozen.

"Hiccup?" she pressed gently.

"Iâ€¦I walked into the door," I stuttered softly, handing her back the slightly wet handkerchief.

The bell rang just then, saving me from further conversation.

"I have to go." I stood from my desk, trying my hardest not to break down and start crying all over again. I left the drawing on my desk, watching as the air blowing through the vent made it flutter to the floor in front of Ms. Delaney. I knew she was going to stop, knew she was going to pick it up, but I didn't try to stop her. I just walked away.

Please don't let her ask any more questions, please don't let her ask any more questionsâ€¦

27. Self-Hate

****Chapter 27: Self-Hate ****

****A/N: This chapter is alright, I guess. It doesn't really make a splash and it's not very emotional, but at least the writing is okay. I don't really like it though. I hope you guys do.****

****I promise that next chapter, I won't say a single darned thing against myself, my writing or this story. I mean, it's not like this chapter's _awful,_ it's just _okay_. ****

* * *

><p>I sort of hid out for the rest of that day, taking longer routes to my classes by going down deserted hallways and hiding out in bathrooms until hallways cleared, things like that. I was tired of being stared at because of my collapse and my bruise, and now all the students in Ms. Delaney's class were going to be discussing my mental breakdown in art as well.<p>

But so far, I had managed to avoid a lot of that just by ducking into bathrooms or down empty hallways until the halls cleared, and I could get to my classes without having to deal with all that staring. And it was my last class of the day. I was free to go home after this, free to go home and add Xs and think about all the ways I'd screwed upâ€¦

I gingerly touched my bruised cheek, but a few people gave me curious looks as I took my seat, so I stopped, turning to the teacher's desk. Mr. Warren was kind of frowning at me, too, when he spotted the bruise, but I was not going to have a repeat of what had happened in art. I limited myself to one nervous breakdown per day, thank you very much.

I dropped my eyes down to my own desk as Mr. Warren began taking attendance. In fact, the only thing I said within the hour was, 'I'm here'. I listened half-heartedly to his lecture, but I spent the time doodling Xs instead of taking notes. I didn't really feel like paying that close attention today, even though I knew I should. Those straight As were grades I had to get, and I had no choice. If I brought home a report card with Bs, what would Dad say? Would he beat me for it? And a B report card would mean no food for a week, well, a long time. Long enough.

Speaking of food, my stomach kept grumbling quietly throughout the class, reminding me that I had eaten next to nothing all day. I still had a promise to myself to keep: no food for a week. I had promised myself that in the hospital, but it wasn't easy to keep the promise there, because they fed me anyway, without even asking my opinion on it. And they had left me with a food pyramid sheet and a bill ten miles long that I had no way to pay. I groaned, rubbing my temples with two fingers and pulling my knees closer when my stomach gave another growl. All I wanted was to go home.

But it turned out, I didn't even get to do that. I was walking by Ms. Delaney's classroom, and kind of trying to hurry because I didn't want her to see me if she was in there, but as it turned out, my attempts at stealth did nothing, because her voice still rang out, cool and clear. "Hiccup? Could you come in here a moment, please?"

I wanted to ignore her and run away, run as far and fast as I could away from this school until I reached my house, but I went in her classroom anyway. I sighed as I pushed the door a bit wider and I saw that she had my crumpled, nearly torn drawing smoothed out on the desk in front of her. "Have a seat," she indicated the chair behind her desk with a smile, a chair next to hers.

I collapsed into the seat, my legs shaking when I saw she had the drawing. _What happened to her not asking any more questions?! _"Erâ€¦hello, Ms. Delaney. Whyâ€¦why are you calling me here?"

She fixed me with a searching look. "I think you know why, Hiccup, even if you won't admit it."

"I won't have any more breakdowns in your class," I offered halfheartedly. "I'll save them for when I'm at home, if you like."

"No. That's not what I'd like." She pulled her chair closer to mine, thrusting the drawing into my trembling hand. "Can you explain to me what this is, Hiccup?"

"Me," I responded, trying to shove it back at her, but she wouldn't let me.

"Why are you surrounded by Xs and broken bottles? Would you like to explain that?"

"Because I break things."

"What kind of things? Do you break things when you're angry, is that what you mean?"

"I don't get angry, Ms. Delaney."

"Everybody gets angry sometime, Hiccup."

"I don't."

"Well, then, why don't you?"

"I don't have any room to get angry. There's no place for anger in my life. So I don't feel it."

"That sounds a little unhealthy, don't you think?" She brushed the hair out of my eyes. "So, what you're trying to say is that you do get angry, but you have no healthy way to express it."

"I didn't say that."

Ms. Delaney looked back down at the drawing with pursed lips. "I'm thinking that you are angry. And let me hazard a guess here that you're angry enough to break things and hit people, but what you mean is, you don't have room to get angry, so you turn the anger inward. Am I close here?"

I stood from my chair, but she pushed me back down. "I'd like to leave. My dad wants me to be home soon."

Her eyes softened. "Hiccup, is everything alright at home?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, you come back to class with a lot of bruises sometimes."

"I'm clumsy. You know that. I walked into a door last night, okay? Now, do you mind letting me leave, because I really need to get home."

"Hiccup—" she kind of pursed her lips, staring down at her desk. "Do you know what self-hate is?"

"S-sure," I shrugged, surprised. I rose from my chair. "It's where you have an aspect of yourself you don't really like and want to change, right?"

"No." She shook her head fiercely, walking to the whiteboard at the front of the room and grabbing up a neon green marker. Ms. Delaney scribbled fiercely on the board for a couple seconds, and when she drew back again, I could read the words she'd written. On one side, it read, SELF HATE in green block letters. On the other, it read, LOW SELF-ESTEEM.

"There's a huge difference between what you just described to me, and self-hate, Hiccup," Ms. Delaney said seriously. "What you're thinking of is low self-esteem, or meager self confidence. What I'm talking about is self-hate. When you honestly can't find anything likeable about yourself, when you just feel completely ugly and unlovable, I mean, when—when you can't even stand to look in the mirror because it's too hard."

I remembered how I'd looked in the mirror on the first night I'd gone to the ice cream shop with Toothless and the girls, how I'd glanced away again, hating everything about the boy in the mirror. I'd wished

my reflection away so often that night, and it made my stomach clench and my eyes sting with fresh tears. "Iâ€¦I don'tâ€¦"

"And the worst part is, self-hate isn't just there when you're born, and it doesn't just come for no reason. People are constantly telling you things, showing you things, and if they tell you good things about yourself, and show you nice things, you're going to like yourself a lot better than if they tell you bad things, and show you ugly things. Andâ€¦and basically, you're like a pot, and the more negative things people add to your pot, the worse it's going to get. A fire starts underneath your pot, and it just boils everything again and again until eventually, it all boils over. You can live with it boiling inside the pot for a long time. You might think you can do it all your life, but you can't. It is going to boil over. Hiccupâ€¦"

Ms. Delaney ceased her pacing and knelt down next to me, one hand on my knee. Her other hand found mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. I swallowed, but I didn't pull away. "Do you have a pot?" she inquired softly. "And what sort of negative things have people added to it?"

Too many things to count, I decided. I shrugged. "I don't know. People have been adding things to my pot all my life, I guess. If everybody's in perfect agreement about it, then maybe I deserve it, right?"

"No." Her face tightened. "You don't deserve it, Hiccup, no matter what you've been told." She ruffled my hair, running her fingers through it. "Nobody deserves what people add to their pot."

I didn't want to like it, but I did. I liked her touch, and I leaned into it, letting myself remember my mother for a brief moment. And then I blinked away the stinging hot tears. "What if I do? What if somebody told me that I did, and you told me that I didn't, only they were right?"

"They're not right," she whispered.

"He's always right."

"He?"

I couldn't meet her eye.

"Hiccup? Who's been adding things to your pot?"

I shook my head, pressing my lips together and wiping at my eyes.

"Please talk to me."

"I can't," I whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry, I should never have said anything." I tried to stand, gently removing my hand from hers. "I have to go."

"Hiccup, you never answered my question. Are things okay at home?"

I was sick and tired of lying, but this was just one thing that I had to keep lying about. I took a breath, deciding on the truth at the

last second. "I want them to be."

"What are you talking about?"

I sighed helplessly. "I want things to be alright at home, because my dad is really stressed these days, and he used to be a really relaxed person. I just miss the person he used to be, but once things settle down, they should go back to normal."

Her eyes softened. "Is that it? Is that the only thing at home that isn't alright?"

I nodded, and then walked from her classroom. This time, she didn't stop me. And I both hoped that she'd believe me, and quietly begged her not to.

28. Ghost

****Chapter 28: Ghost****

****A/N: Hey, guys. A great night is not to be, but I did get this written. It's pretty lame. ****

* * *

><p>You don't have to be dead to be a ghost. You don't have to hide under a sheet, or howl dramatically whenever somebody approaches.<p>

All you have to do is feel dead. All you have to do is hide under a layer of lies. All you have to do is cry for help on the inside. You're still a ghost, either way. Walking the world alone, wandering with no clear purpose. Drifting. Aimless.

I know this because I'm the finest example of a ghost. As I walked from Ms. Delaney's classroom, my grip on my backpack's broken straps white-knuckled, I felt more ghostly than ever, like I was floating a foot or two above the ground. I quickened my pace, as eager to get away from everyone as fast as possible, but I crashed straight into something solid, and I was yanked back onto solid ground for a moment. Blinking up into the surprisingly bright sunlight, because everything looks so much darker when you're a ghost, I realized I had run into Snotlout Jorgenson.

He looked kind of amused, because he was smirking really widely. "Hey, loser," he greeted, rather cheerfully.

"Hello, Snotlout," I replied cautiously, struggling to rise to my feet. My backpack weighed me down a bit, so I decided the pavement wasn't that bad of a spot to be in right now.

"So, what did Ms. Delaney want with you?"

When I glanced around, I realized Snotlout had Tuffnut and the curly-haired boy from English with him, and both of them were smirking, too. My heart picked up speed and I swallowed. "Wanted to talk to me about one of my drawings." No way was I telling them the truth.

I slid my arm out of the backpack strap and rose to my feet without being encumbered by all that extra weight. "Let me by, please," I added, slightly quieter as I lost my nerve halfway through.

"Oh, yeah?" Snotlout blocked my path easily. "Which drawing?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. The self-portrait I did in her class today. Apparently she really liked it."

"Liar," snorted the curly-haired boy. "Nobody could like anything YOU draw unless they were blind."

My cheeks heated, and my hands clenched into fists. I could hear the pencil scratching across the paper, adding more Xs to the sheet in my head. _Just make it home. If you make it home, you can add more Xs and you don't have to eat and everything will be fine. _

"Or they were really into Xs," Snotlout added, as if guessing my train of thought. His brown eyes sparkled with malice. "So, what were those Xs supposed to be, really?"

"Th-they were just doodles," I stuttered nervously, hating myself for afraid I sounded. "I just get bored in class sometimes, we all do, andâ€"

"Then why do you look like you're about to faint?" He raised a questioning eyebrow.

_Because I am. _"Erâ€|no, I don't."

The curly-haired boy rolled his eyes.

"C'mon, Snotlout," one of his other friends joined us suddenly, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "He isn't worth it, he's useless."

I bit my lip against the harsh words, staring down at the cracks in the pavement, swearing to myself that I could run the moment they were gone. I could add as many Xs as I wanted, and once I did I was sure to feel better, more like myself again. I hated myself for everything I'd told Ms. Delaney. Why did I have to be so stupid?

Snotlout shrugged. "You've got a point." He leaned over and gave me a hard shove, and I fell onto the walkway again, hitting my backpack heavily. I pushed myself up on shaking hands but Snotlout had already walked off with Tuffnut and the other guy. The curly-haired boy remained, shaking his head, a smirk twisting his lips.

Even though a cold breeze blew all around us, I wasn't shuddering from the cold. I didn't like the look on his face.

But he didn't try anything. He just walked away, still shaking his head with that cold smile.

You don't have to be dead to be a ghost. You don't have to hide under a sheet, or howl dramatically whenever somebody approaches.

All you have to do is feel dead. All you have to do is hide under a layer of lies. All you have to do is cry for help on the inside.

You're still a ghost, either way. Walking the world alone, wandering with no clear purpose. Drifting. Aimless.

29. Nice and Neat

****Chapter 29: Nice and Neat****

****A/N: SURPRISE****

****Yes, this is the surprise. Updating all of my eighteen in-progress fics at once. It was pretty crazy, but I did it, and it's here, and good day to you all! I had tons of fun doing this, so I hope you guys have tons of fun reading this! ****

****And I listened to Adrian Von Ziegler's 'Requiem for the Nameless Dead' while I wrote this chapter. Oddly fitting for Hiccup from this AU, I think. Warning, suicidal thoughts. I think that's all. Good day. ****

*** * ***

><p>I remember a long time ago, maybe when I was nine or ten, and my mother was still alive, I was sitting at the breakfast table with her and Dad, and she had left a portion of the newspaper on the table when she had finished reading. I'd glanced at the paper as I'd risen to my feet, and I saw, in huge block letters, the words, HAVE YOU SEEN THIS CHILD? Below, there was a picture of a boy about my age, smiling at the camera, looking perfectly cheerful.<p>

At the time, I hadn't thought anything of the article â€" I'd taken my plate to the sink and gone on my way, but more and more these days, I'm beginning to wonder if one day that was my face in the newspaper articles. What if I appeared there one day, a smiling teenage boy gone missing suddenly, and everybody at school glanced at my empty desk every so often? What if they talked about it at school for days, wondering where I was, where I had gone?

And then they'd conclude that I must have run away and gotten myself killed, and I would have been forgotten so easily. My empty desk would not have been something to talk about, it would have become my classmates' normal. And as I walked home from school, I kept worrying about what Ms. Delaney would ask me the next day, whether she would try and figure out more about my home lifeâ€|

I shuddered, pushing the thoughts to the back of my mind as I readjusted my backpack so it rested more comfortably between my shoulder blades. My stomach hurt with how badly I wanted to eat, but I knew that crying in school, crying in front of people and making them ask questions and making Ms. Delaney ask questions was a huge X. I would not be eating for much, much longer than a week.

What would happen to me, I wondered, gazing down at my body, what would happen if I just didn't eat? If I ignored the constant but familiar pangs of hunger and let myself waste away, let myself die, fall into blacknessâ€|?

At least if I did do that, I wouldn't have to worry about collapsing from hunger. There had to be a point where the human body simply gave out, where it couldn't take anymore of being denied what it needed

and simply shut down. That would be wonderful, I thought longingly to myself as I turned down the street to go into my neighborhood, gazing up at the clouds in the sky. That would be wonderful to just die so simply, so easily, so neatly. I wouldn't have to resort to a gun, to a knife. I could just die so easily, and I wouldn't even leave a mess for my father to clean up. They would all assume I had taken an eating disorder too far " they would never have to know the truth, and I could die all nice and neat, and be buried in a casket, all nice and neat, and my father would never beat me again and everybody at school would forget about me just like that. Nice and neat and painless.

I looked up at the sky again, remembering times in my childhood when I would find shapes in the clouds, dragons and Viking helmets and imaginative things, back when I was innocent and carefree, back when I was not a mistake. I sighed a little as I stared up at them, wondering if I would ever find that carefree innocence again.

No, I decided sadly. I was not worth it. I didn't deserve something that nice. I heard something rattling oddly in my backpack and, as I went up the sidewalk to our house, I pulled the straps off my shoulders completely and unzipped it, looking for whatever had made the noise. Finding nothing but textbooks, I shrugged and got ready to drop it when I noticed the bottle. Tylenol, sitting patiently on the outside pocket of my backpack, waiting to be used at any time " maybe even waiting to be _over_used.

Slowly, hesitantly, I pulled it out of the pocket, collapsing on the couch, staring down at the little white bottle. According to the numbers scratched into the side, the pills were nearing their expiration date, anyway. Somebody needed to use them.

And then I had to smile, because I was thinking of such a human thing, using pills before the expiration date. I unscrewed the cap and poured about six into my hand, staring at them, the tiny white doorways to death, and I slowly poured them all back inside. I placed the bottle back in my backpack, and I rose from my seat on the couch, walking upstairs to add the Xs. I didn't have anybody to say goodbye to, so writing notes didn't matter. Nobody would miss me.

And tomorrow, at this time, I would be sitting up, waiting to feel the pills taking effect, slowly killing me, and I smiled a very odd smile, one that I had never given before. I could feel it twisting my face into an unfamiliar shape, grim and bitter and oddly satisfied. Tomorrow, I would swallow the pills, but there would be no sign of what my father had done to me, what had driven me to this point.

"Just a troubled mind," they would say, and they'd forget me, because I was that easy to forget, that easy to cast off as unimportant. I would give it one more day. Just one more. But after that, I would take the pills and I would die. Nice and neat.

30. The Last Lap

****Chapter 30: The Last Lap ****

****A/N: This chapter is really odd. The main theme is depressing, but Hiccup is pretty cheerful. ****

* * *

><p>You know, I remember, right after my mom died, I would think about all her little habits, or her favorite sayings, and just cling to them as tight as I could. I would try my hardest to keep them in my mind, because to me, forgetting them meant forgetting her. And that, I told myself, was something I must never do.<p>

But one of her favorite sayings was, oddly enough, the one I never really thought much about. It came back to me as I sat there on the couch, looking down at the pills clutched tightly in my hand, the little red cap waiting patiently to be untwisted, the pills within simply waiting to be used again. For the first time in my life, I might have just made a decision that could make people happy, instead of all the sadness I had brought my father over the years. Maybe he'd finally be happy and quit getting drunk.

The thought upset me, but it also made me smile a little. Maybe he'd finally be able to love himself and someone else again if I was gone. Maybe I had been that one obstacle standing in his way.

And then I remembered my mother's favorite saying, something she used to repeat around me a lot as a kid.

"_There's something in everyone worth saving." _

I shook my head as I slid the bottle back in my backpack pocket, listening to the rattle within, the promise of relief. Maybe that was true, that there really was something in everyone worth saving, but I knew the truth about myself and I knew that that phrase did not apply to me. Because, while there might be something worth saving in someone, there was nothing in no one.

* * *

><p>I didn't particularly want to go to school the next day, when I sat up in bed and remembered everything, but I told myself it wasn't that big of a deal. It was just one more day, after all. I wanted to avoid Ms. Delaney, but I also wanted to see Toothless and the girls. Considering I'd avoided them all day yesterday, I figured I needed to thank them today, for putting up with me and everything, before I actually did the deed. I needed to thank them for mixing in some happy memories with all the bad ones. At least if my life flashed before my eyes, it wouldn't be a multitude of beatings before the actual death part.<p>

So, I reluctantly shoved off my covers, swung my legs off the side of the bed and started to get dressed for school. It was pouring rain outside, as per usual in the town of Berk. This had to be the wettest place on earth, at least at this time of year. I picked up my backpack as I headed out the door, the pills rattling comfortably within the inside pocket. Just a few more hours and things would be over. I guess a part of me made myself go to school in the first place, not because I really felt that much like thanking the kids who were nice to me out of pity, but I guess because I hoped things would magically change for me. Like Cinderella, just a magic wave of the wand and a bippity-boppity-boo later, everything was perfect for her.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a glass slipper to make everything all right again. But I did have a bottle of pills, and that was pretty much the same thing.

And my experience in school that day was weird. I mean, really weird. I was planning to go home and freaking kill myself in just a few hours, and I felt happy. I was going to die and I felt truly alive, for the first time in a long time. It was like I had been wandering around wearing glasses with blurry lenses, and cotton balls in my ears. Something had happened to me overnight, the glasses had gotten torn off, the cotton balls had been ripped out, and now I was suddenly standing in a sea of people, aware of seemingly everything that was going on.

I could see Snotlout Jorgenson, Tuffnut Thorston and the curly-haired boy standing talking with each other by their lockers, punching each other on the shoulders and basically acting stupid, but for the first time, I didn't walk by them with my eyes fixed intently on my shoelaces. I kept my chin up this time, I strode past them, and I didn't feel scared of them anymore. What could they possibly say to hurt me now? I wouldn't be around to feel the pain much longer. Nothing could hurt me today. My race had been run. No, I hadn't reached the finish line. I'd ducked out early, but that was okay, because there was no gold medal awaiting me at the end, even if I did care to finish.

There was no need for me to keep running anymore. My race was drawing to a close. I was going to run one final lap, and then go off to sit in the bleachers. Maybe there was a life after death, and maybe God really did love everyone, even useless mistakes like me. My mouth twisted into another bitter, grim smile as I thought of it. Even a deity couldn't love someone like me.

I started scanning the hallways for the familiar faces of Toothless, Astrid, or Ruffnut, but they were nowhere to be found. Maybe they weren't here yet, or maybe they were already in their classrooms? Once I found them, though, there wouldn't be any point in staying here, would there? I could talk with them at lunch, maybe, and then skip the rest of the day. And, you know, every day after that.

That was another thing that had changed; the Hiccup from even a week ago would have completely balked at the idea of skipping school for any reason. Heaven forbid the perfect little overachiever miss even a second of class. His straight-A-plus score might dip.

Now? Who cared what my grades were? Grades weren't enough to get my father to look at me, and they weren't enough to get me to like myself. I reached my locker and checked the hall one last time to be sure that none of the three of the people I searched for were there, and then something dark caught my eye. There was a deep purple banner stretched across the back wall, with a little cartoon monster on the top.

SCARY GOOD ART! ENTER TODAY! It read, in cheerful, bold yellow block letters. I looked at the banner for a long second, remembering Ms. Delaney urging us all to sign up for the art competition. I shook my head slowly to myself as I shut my locker again. I'd have to clean it out tomorrow " I didn't want to leave any messes for anyone else to have to clean up. Nice and neat.

I looked at the purple banner again, remembering all the compliments Toothless had given me about my drawings. I didn't have to let everything tie up so nicely. If I entered the competition today, I would never have to hear everybody making fun of it, like I'm sure they would. And there was pretty much zero chance of me winning anyway, so why not, right?

A part of me wanted to submit then and there, before I lost my nerve, but I directed my steps toward my algebra class. Even if I was through being the overachiever after today, I was still never late. I pushed open the wooden door leading into the classroom, and spotted Ruffnut and Astrid sitting at side-by-side desks, whispering to each other. I took a breath as I slid into the seat across from them. Two of the three I searched for had been found, and I was fast reaching the end of my last lap.

31. The Hours Before

****Chapter 31: The Hours Before****

****A/N:** Heyyyy guys. Guess what? For some crazy reason, the month of October reminds me of Toothless, especially from this story. October 12th was his birthday. It'd make a nice belated present for him (and a suuuuper early present for meeee my birthday's not til winter) to hit 800 reviews, don't you think? x3 and of course a super early present for Hiccup. I think his birthday's February 29? Well, it was in the books. I like this chapter a lot. Pleaseeeeeee help me hit 800 reviews, please? :3 even if I don't, though, you guys have been really amazing :D 796, just wow! ******

* * *

><p>I pulled out my algebra book as I waited for a break in the conversation they were having; the two girls had their heads together, and they both looked really engrossed in whatever they were talking about.<p>

It turns out, I didn't have to wait for them; Astrid lifted her head and spotted me. Her eyes widened before lighting up. "Hiccup!"

I wondered why she sounded so happy. Surely she didn't really like seeing me all that much, did she? I met her gaze and tried my hardest to smile, to shove my confusion to the back of my mind. She was just good at pretending she liked people, that was all. I was an annoyance to her. "Hi, guys. Or girls, I guess."

"Where were you?" Astrid demanded, cutting across my greeting. "We didn't see you at school yesterday â€" did you stay home?"

"Oh, uhâ€|no, I didn't," I shook my head. "I guess I just missed you guys, wherever you were. I was here yesterday, though." For the first time in a long time, I didn't inwardly cringe at how awkward I sounded; I held my head high and it felt effortless to speak. So many people, over so many years, had stolen my voice, but I was taking it back. One more day with my voice, and then I'd let them reclaim it.

Astrid looked a little confused for some reason, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, the classroom door opened and the teacher

walked in, sending the whisperers a few glares to quiet them down.

I shrugged, sending the girls an apologetic smile. I'd talk to them at lunch, thank them and let them know they didn't have to put up with me then.

For now, thoughâ€¦

For now, the perfect little overachiever had another A to get before he could die.

* * *

><p>Astrid kept looking at me kind of strangely all through algebra, and even English class. Mrs. Merriman reminded us to keep writing in our journals, making me realize that I hadn't written a word in mine since the day she assigned them to us, eight days ago. I had tried, I had opened the notebook several times, but even though I was dying to say something to somebody, the right words had never come. Each time, I had closed the notebook again. This should have made me freak out. It would have made old me freak out. But I wasn't scared. My grades didn't matter anymore. I wouldn't be around to see them, to feel that sense of relief whenever I saw I scored all As on my report card.<p>

But all those stupid straight As meant nothing. I always felt a sense of rising hope whenever I saw them, because I thought that maybe, just maybe, they'd be good enough to get my dad to look at me again. But no. He walked right past me every time, brushed me off, even when he knew that neglect was the most cruel blow he had against me. At least when he was beating me and screaming at me, he was looking at me, paying attention to me, speaking to me. Negative attention was sometimes better than no attention at all.

Since English was all about the importance of getting our thoughts down on paper, I probably zoned out a little more than I should have, doodling on random pieces of scrap paper, which made me remember the art competition. At any rate, I could at least enter to know that I had done something with my art, the only thing I enjoyed doing. I probably should have started counting up my mistakes, but I didn't really think it mattered anymore. I was going to die soon, and then I wouldn't have to live like this. No more counting up my mistakes by Xs, and starving myself and hating myself and living in darkness and being terrified of light. No more beatings, or bruises, or having to lie because I was too scared, and because I knew I deserved it and because this secret was between me and my father.

The bell rang, signaling the end of English class, and I felt Astrid's gaze on my back again. I reluctantly slowed my pace to match hers, so we could talk as we went towards the cafeteria.

However, she didn't look confused anymore, really; she was smiling a little as she regarded me. "You look different."

"I brushed my hair this morning," I offered halfheartedly, and she laughed, making me smile.

"No, I meanâ€¦I meant that you look different, it'sâ€¦it's something in your eyes. You look happier, Hiccup."

"Thanks. I think." I shrugged, deciding to accept the compliment. "Hey, I kind of want to talk to youâ€¦I like, all of you. Ruffnut and Toothless too, I mean."

Confusion crossed her face again. "Alright. C'mon, then, hurry up." Astrid pulled me into the double doors leading to the cafeteria, but for a few moments, I couldn't find Ruffnut or Toothless. Then I saw them, sitting at a private table near the back, unlike the ones right in the center that we normally took.

Astrid and I made a beeline for them, but something was clearly wrong: though they were both sitting together, they were staring in opposite directions, and there was an air of tension about the table.

"Hi, guys," I ventured carefully, taking a seat across from Ruffnut. It didn't seem like her to pick a fight with Toothless, I thought.

Astrid slid into the seat next to me, but she had clearly picked up on the tense mood, because she wasn't smiling anymore. "Is everything okay?"

Ruffnut caught sight of Astrid, and offered us a smile that was clearly forced. "Yep, everything's fine. Toothless was just telling me aboutâ€¦uhh, the anime he tried to get us to watch again."

It seemed like kind of a weak excuse to me, but perhaps Toothless and Ruffnut had argued about anime before, because Astrid seemed to accept it. "Alright," she grinned before grabbing her lunch out of her backpack. Her eyes slid back to me and she motioned for me to get up.

"Astrid," I began uneasily as I followed her to a spot about ten feet away from the table, where Ruffnut and Toothless resumed their argument. "What's wrong?"

Instead of answering, she took my wrist and began pulling me along again as she spoke. "You didn't bring any food again, and I'm assuming your money situation hasn't changed. Honestly, doesn't your father give you enough for food?" Astrid pulled out a five dollar bill and a few quarters, dropping them in my palm. "Buy yourself something. Please."

I hesitated, staring at the money before grabbing a tray. I wanted to say that I'd pay her back, butâ€¦I wouldn't live long enough to do that. "This is a one-time thing," I settled on saying instead.

Astrid smiled, relief evident in her eyes. "Okay." I don't think she really believed me, but at the time, it didn't matter. I walked to the counter and just grabbed the first things I could find, which turned out to be a chicken salad sandwich, a milk carton and a donut. I put them all carefully on the tray before going back to the table, the carton of milk rattling slightly due to the shaking of my hands. I probably shouldn't have let Astrid buy me anything, but I was dying soon anyway. Did it really matter anymore?

Besides, I was starving.

As I neared the table, however, I started to realize that maybe we should leave Ruffnut and Toothless alone. Their argument had reached quite a volume now, and I distinctly heard Ruffnut say, "If you weren't being so stupid about this!"

"Whoa, guys," Astrid cut in, slipping back into her seat and patting the spot next to her for me. "What's going on?"

I set the tray down on the table and slid onto the bench, eyeing Ruffnut curiously. She saw me looking and smiled.

"Nothing," Toothless huffed; his cheeks were tinged pink. "It's not important." And then, looking from the tray to me to Astrid, "Did she break you down?"

I nodded before returning my attention to Ruffnut and raising an eyebrow, asking a silent question.

Her response was a slight shake of the head, and a discreet jerk of the chin in Astrid's direction. She could tell me what she and Toothless had been fighting about, but it had to wait until Astrid was out of the room. I shrugged, picking up the sandwich and taking a bite.

It probably tasted as good as it did because I hadn't eaten anything all day, or the day before that, except hospital food. As I took a second bite, Astrid turned to me and said, "So, Hiccup, what did you want to talk to us about?"

I hesitated for a split second before swallowing the bite I had in my mouth and setting my sandwich down. I was nearing the end of my final lap.

32. What I'm Dying For

****Chapter 32: What I'm Dying For ****

****A/N: Well, the climax is almost here! Just keep on waiting. It'll come. Ohhhhh yesssss it will come. Plus also, news of my plant Jack: I don't even know what he's doing anymore. He could be dying, he could be hibernating. I think he needs more food. Sorry about the shortness of the chapter.****

****Plus also OH MY GOSH 800 REVIEWS HOLY CRAPPP EEK EEK EEK EEKK EEEEEEEEEEE :DDDDDDDDDDDD Thank you all so so so so much! This story should be over very soon, I don't know why I keep pushing it farther...if I just made my chapters longer, we'd reach the climax a lot quicker, but no, I cannae do that. I suck at writing long chapters. It really sucks. ****

*** * ***

><p>They were all looking at me, waiting for me to say something, but I didn't know how to start. The end of the lap was coming up fast, and I just couldn't think of the best way to duck out. "Iâ€|I guess I just wantedâ€|to say thank you."<p>

The three of them exchanged bewildered looks, but it was Toothless who actually spoke. "Uhhhhâ€|for what?"

My eyebrows flew up. I guess I had expected them to automatically know what I was talking about. "For, you know. Being my friend."

"Oh." Astrid's face cleared, and she smiled. "You know, you don't have to thank us for that, Hiccup. It's what people are supposed to be for each other."

"Oh." I replied softly, looking down at my sandwich again. "Well, it's just, it probably wasn't easy sticking around me out of pity, soâ€"

"Out of pity?" It was Ruffnut who interrupted me now.

"Wellâ€|yeah, I mean, that is why you guysâ€"

"Hiccup, we didn't become your friends out of pity," Astrid said slowly.

I was about to finish my sentence, and I'd even opened my mouth to do so, but then the meaning of the words reached me. "Wait. You didn't?"

Now Astrid looked surprised, confused, and more than a little concerned. "No, Hiccup. We didn't. We became your friend because we like you."

It was lucky that I didn't have food in my mouth, because I would have choked on it laughing. "If you're trying to spare my feelings, you really don't have to do that. It doesn't bother me, and I won't think any less of you guys."

"But we mean it," Ruffnut insisted. She put her hand over mine, and I jumped slightly, unused to this gentle contact. "I don't pity you â€" I like you." She smiled at me for a second before a pink blush tinged her cheeks. "I mean â€" we like you. We all like you. As friends."

Toothless chuckled at her reaction before I saw Astrid's sneakered foot moving beneath the table, and kicking him in the shin. "Ow! Yeah, we like you cuz you're cool."

"Really?" I couldn't pretend anymore that their words didn't mean anything; even if Toothless had needed a little kick to say so, even he'd admitted that they weren't pitying me. Was it possible that to three whole people in this world, I was not a mistake?

"Yes," Astrid reiterated.

I looked down at my sandwich again as I processed their words. Was it possibleâ€|? Was it really and trulyâ€|?

Of course not, I chided myself. They were just lying to me, probably making fun of me. I couldn't trust them. They were lying.

Well, they certainly weren't going to make a fool out of me, no matter how hard they tried. I wasn't letting myself get mixed up in their pity. I took another bite of the sandwich, the last charity gift.

And then I came to the uncomfortable realization that they were all still staring at me.

"What?" I demanded, probably sounding a little jumpy.

Ruffnut and Toothless both looked away quickly, pretending they hadn't been staring, but Astrid's blue eyes stayed focused boldly on me, and did not move all the way through lunch. And by the way she was looking, I would have sworn that she could see right through me.

* * *

><p>Art was an unsettling class for me. For one, Ms. Delaney looked at me in almost the same way Astrid had, and the familiar frown appeared on her face when my hair parted, revealing the bruise still on my face. It had turned greenish-yellow overnight, but people were still looking at it and whispering about it.<p>

And then I remembered my promise to myself to enter the art competition, and I realized I didn't have a drawing. I mean, I did. I had drawings in my sketchbook, but I didn't really want to use any of them. I wanted to do something different for this. So I pretended that I couldn't read the mental signals Ms. Delaney was clearly giving me. I just pulled out a pencil and my sketchbook, sliding into the seat behind my desk. The room slowly filled up around me, but when Ms. Delaney spoke, she didn't sound like her usual cheerful self. She sounded distracted.

"Good morning, class," she greeted absentmindedly, picking up the pink and purple stationary. I suddenly realized that this was the last time I was going to see it. The end of the last lap was coming up so fast; I had barely even slowed to appreciate it.

"Okay, the prompt for the day isâ€|" Ms. Delaney looked down at the paper with none of her usual excitement. "Torn."

I listened idly to the chatter around me as everyone began pulling out their books, but I just sat back, twirling the pencil in my fingers. What could I draw that would fulfill the prompt? Torn. Torn.

The word echoed in my head as I considered. What could I turn into art today? I had addressed my Xs, my anger, my sadness, the fact that I was a complete mistakeâ€|but there were still three things that I had left untouched, and I knew I had to address them soon. I was dying anyway. Nobody would care. Nobody would know. There'd be no sign that I was ill when I was dead.

I turned to a fresh sheet and began to draw. At first it was just a couple strokes, and then it grew into jagged lines, broken and ripped and most importantly, _torn. _But you know what? This time, looking at the drawing did not make me fall into despair. I stared down at it for a second as I put the finishing touches on it, but I didn't cry and I didn't feel like it. Oddly enough, I just kind of smiled. A smile that matched the grim, bitter, almost insane upward curve of the lips that I had given when I'd sat on the couch yesterday. I didn't feel upset at all, because I knew now that the Xs and the beatings and the lies were not what I was living for anymore. They

were what I was dying for.

33. Quiet

****Chapter 33: Quiet ****

****A/N:** This chapter is dedicated to a close friend of mine, RazzlePazzleDooDot. Last year, she left me a review telling me her birthday, and I posted a chapter in celebration of it without even knowing her. Last year, she was a random reader of mine and I was a random reader of hers. A year has passed, and now I consider her a close friend. I am truly blessed to have a friend like her. She has been wonderful and supportive, and she has the patience of a saint. (I can say this truthfully, for I know I have none xD xD) RazzlePazzleDooDot, I hope you have an excellent birthday today! I raise my cup of coffee to you. Even though you don't like coffee. Anyway, I hope everyone else enjoys this chapter, too! ******

* * *

><p>The drawing took a little while to complete.<p>

Oddly enough, although I was aware of my surroundings, and had been all day, everything seemed to fall away while I drew. I could still faintly hear the other kids' pencils scratching on their papers, reminding me that the real world existed outside my white pages, but never had I ignored it so completely.

I had never ignored my embarrassing lack of talent when it came to drawing, either, not the way I did today. Who cared if the posing was stiff, or if I had to use my eraser from time to time? I didn't, not then.

I could even ignore the class whispering about me in the first few minutes of the drawing, their voices rustling like leaves on a tree. I could hear it, but for the first time in forever, I just didn't care.

I'd had all I could take.

I had dealt with Snotlout bullying me all the time, I'd dealt with being practically invisible to my classmates and my father. I'd dealt with being beaten whenever somebody felt they needed to let off some steam. I'd dealt with people trying to push drugs off on me. I guess that I'd just never realized before that I had a breaking point; I had a line drawn in the sand, and so many people had crossed it. I'd just never realized how much I kept letting them cross it and letting them cross it and now Ms. Delaney was right. My pot was boiling over.

She'd said the boiling over would be ugly and that I wouldn't be able to take it. She was right. I couldn't take it. I was weak, and I was imperfect. But she was wrong about it being ugly. It wasn't ugly. Nobody else even noticed. I was boiling over quietly. I did everything quietly.

The perfect little overachiever did everything quietly, so quiet and methodical and perfect and goddamn invisible to everyone, his own father, who was supposed to love him. His own father, who he had

killed himself getting As forâ€¦

I was pulled suddenly out of the drawing and back into the real world, looking down at my shaking hands with something close to surprise. I guess Ms. Delaney had been right about more than a pot. She'd been right about my anger, too. I'd spent so long turning it inward, never allowing myself to feel anything about the dark hell in which I had found myself, constantly telling myself that I deserved it and that I was no good, that the anger I felt now with my father was foreign to me. But it didn't feel wrong.

No, for once, it felt nice to be feeling this way. Finally, I had another person to be mad at, another person to blame. It wasn't just me anymore, all alone in the house, cleaning up broken bottles and adding Xs and quietly coming to a boil. There was my dad, too.

I stared down at the drawing for another second, shaking my head as Ms. Delaney began doing her usual rounds around the desks, complimenting everybody as she passed. When she got to my desk, I didn't try to cover the drawing with my arm or something, as I normally would have done. I just didn't care anymore. I had a breaking point. I had reached it. In fact, I had gone way past it. But I was slamming on the brakes now. I was ducking out of the race. My breaking point had been reached, yet the finish line hadn't.

The bell rang just as Ms. Delaney reached my desk, but I shoved my sketchbook in my backpack before she could see it. It really wasn't that I cared; I just didn't want to waste any more time here. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, so I could do what I wanted to do.

"Hiccup," she put a gentle hand on my shoulder as I passed, "would you stay behind for a moment?"

I sighed, but I smiled and nodded anyway. A few more minutes, and then I could go home. All the pain would be over. "Yes, Ms. Delaney?"

"I just wanted to see you," she responded gently, taking my hand and leading me back over to her desk. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay afterâ€¦after everything that happened." Her brown eyes were sad as she brushed the hair out of my eyes. Her fingers traced the bruise around my eye.

I tried to smile for her. "Yes, I'm alright."

"Hiccup, you were crying in my class yesterday."

"I boiled over." I don't know where the words came from; I just blurted them out.

Ms. Delaney blinked, confused. "You what?"

"I boiled over. Just like you said. My pot had boiled for too long. It boiled over. I boiled over."

"Are you okay now, though?" She bent a little, so we were eye-to-eye.

"Yes," I really meant it this time when I said it.

"Actuallyâ€ everything is working out, better than I could have hoped. Thank you for being there."

Her face relaxed into a soft smile. "Oh, that's wonderful, Hiccup. But you call me if you ever need to talk to me, alright?"

"Don't worry," I assured her. "I will."

"Did everything work out at home?"

Almost unconsciously, I reached up, touching the bruise on the side of my face. "Yes," I whispered. It was the first lie I had told during this whole conversation: a new record for me. "It did."

* * *

><p>The rain had cleared up while I was in school, so by the time I had filled out the form for the art competition and waved goodbye to Toothless, Astrid, and Ruffnut, all three of whom were talking quietly with their heads together when I left the building, the sky was a clear, bright blue. The wind was cool and strong, but it wasn't howling or angry; it was as gentle as wind could ever be. It lifted my hair up, tickled the tops of my ears and blew on past me, wild and free and strong. Soon I would be just like that. No more pain, and no more restraint. Unlimited freedom.<p>

I smiled up into the sky, quickening my pace, listening to that comforting rattle in my backpack pocket. An audible but unspoken promise of relief. They were still rattling when I reached the house and shut the door behind me. I took them out as I walked up the stairs, examining the tiny bottle that had had so much power over me. The pills were even smaller, really, and I tipped almost the whole container's worth out into my hand. I didn't know exactly how much was considered an overdose, but I knew that if I took enough of any kind of medication, I would die.

I took a deep breath as I looked down at the little red pills, resting innocently in my palm. They had no idea what they were about to do. They had no idea that they were about to kill someone.

I took deep breaths as I raised my hand to my lips, savoring each one, as I knew it would be my last.

It would be over soon. I just had to let go.

But I sat there with the pills somewhere in between my hand and my lips, and I hesitated.

34. Overdose

****Chapter 34: Overdose****

****A/N:** This chapter is a little short, but HOLY COW GUYS :DDDDDDDDDD WE'RE ALMOST AT 900 REVIEWS WOW :D I sincerely hope we hit it today! Also, I don't know how accurate all my information was. I did a little research, and thanks to the reviewer, their name escapes me...kitty.0? I think that's their name. They left me a review telling me about overdose on Tylenol, which prompted me to look into it. Also, to the reviewers who weren't sure - Hiccup did enter the

art competition. In chapter 33, he says that he filled out the form, so yes, he entered the art competition. Thank you all so, so so so so much for your support! :D Unfortunately, my updates might not be very often anymore, as I'm doing Nano Wrimo. I do it every year, and I'll miss you all, but I must. It is tradition with me. I've done it since 2011 :D Anyway, thank you all!**

* * *

><p>In that hesitation, I considered Astrid's words today, what she'd told me about why she'd become my friend. "We became your friend because we like you."

That couldn't be true, could it? I ran my hand over the pills again. How could that be true? I was worthless. I was a mistake. There was no way, in heaven or in hell, that anybody could genuinely like me for who I was.

No. It had to be pity.

I raised my hand clutching the pills again, but then I spotted the napkin with Heather's number on it and I hesitated again. I picked up the napkin, and I read the number all the way through. We had a telephone downstairs. I could callâ€¦|

No. I couldn't. I couldn't call her. She was probably at work, and she probably didn't want to be bothered with ridiculous complaints like mine. Besides, what could I expect her to do? Abandon her job just to make me feel better? Yeah, not.

I took a deep breath and I raised my hand for the final time. I wouldn't lower it again, I told myself as I emptied the pills into my open mouth. They went down surprisingly easily, considering how dry my throat was. I didn't think I would need water. I swallowed the last of the pills, unsure how many I had just taken. Curious, I twisted the bottle around and around in my hands, reading all the directions for taking one, and what Tylenol was used for.

I kept expecting the world to darken, pain to suddenly grip my body, but none came. When I read the warning on the side of the bottle, I instantly knew why.

_IN CASE OF OVERDOSE, CONTACT POISON CONTROL CENTER RIGHT AWAY, AS OVERDOSE MAY CAUSE LIVER DAMAGE AND INTENSE VOMITING. _

I stared at the warning for a second, rereading to make sure I hadn't missed a word. It hadn't mentioned death, but maybe death was an understood risk of overdose?

No. No. I couldn't sit here and wait for my body to start rejecting the unhealthy amount of pills. It would do that, soon.

How stupid was I? I groaned in frustration and flung the bottle away, where it hit the wall opposite with a satisfying rattle. I couldn't even kill myself properly. I would probably vomit it out before I could. Not to mention, liver damage seemed like an unpleasant way to go. I stood from the bed, ripped the door open and started down the stairs. I wasn't going to just sit there and wait. I was going to find a better method.

I opened the door to the medicine cabinet, my eyes scanning the first row of bottles, looking for something that would kill me quicker. Paracetamol, Ibuprofenâ€¦ I grabbed both of the bottles and set them on the counter, side-by-side, all nice and neat. I unscrewed both bottles, pouring a handful of the pills in my hand from each, red and white mixing as I held them in my hand before I swallowed.

I knew that it was enough. The overdose would surely be enough to kill me now. But I moved the first row of bottles aside anyway, and I grabbed sleeping pills and popped them in, too. I found medicine to treat fevers and colds, acid reflux and anxiety. I had had a whole cabinet of relief, just waiting for me. Why had I never opened it before? I lost count of how many medications I took. I lost track of pretty much everything. I just kept taking pills, because I knew every swallow brought me closer to death.

After awhile, the effects did start kicking in, and the explosive pain in my stomach sent me to my knees on the kitchen floor as bile rose in my throat. When my stomach had expelled its contents, with something mixed in that looked a little like blood, I thought that maybe I should try to clean up the sick, so Dad didn't have to deal with that when he came home. But I was so tired, and my limbs felt weak. It was hard to breathe, and really, really hard to think straight now. Life didn't look so good anymore from this side of the fence. I really should have kept track of all the medication I'd taken.

I lay down on the kitchen floor, the cool linoleum tiles soothing against my sweaty skin. A harsh, ragged cough forced its way out of my lips as the front door burst open with a mighty crash. I could hear the pounding footsteps of my father, walking nearer and nearer to me, but when he entered the kitchen, I couldn't read the expression on his face. The phone started ringing on the wall behind, or maybe that was just the annoying ringing sound in my ears. I wanted it to go away. It was giving me a headache. I groaned out loud, but I couldn't make my mouth move, and my dad just kept staring at me, until blurry darkness closed over me.

35. Unchained

****Chapter 35: Unchained****

****A/N: Sorry about the shortness. But I thought this could tide you guys over for a few days. Maybe? Yes? Okay, good. Please be patient. Have this chapter and a happy Halloween :D ****

* * *

><p>I was drifting, aimless, unchained, floating in an endless world of sparkling color and light, beautiful sounds filling my ears. The angels, I thought hazily, wishing one would soar into my line of vision. Were the angels leading me to home, or saying their goodbye to me as I sped down to hell?<p>

I turned this thought over in my mind, unable to decide which was more likely, mostly because hell didn't seem a very inviting option right now.

But before the angels could finish their beautiful song, I heard a

voice and I was jolted back into sharp, painful reality. There was no beautiful world anymore. There were flashing red and blue lights and a bad taste in my mouth and my motherâ€¦wait, no, that couldn't be my motherâ€¦my mother was deadâ€¦was I dead?

But if I was dying, the pain should have been fading, and it just kept rising, ever higher like an ocean wave. I wanted to cry from it, but I couldn't even make my lips form words. I struggled to reach for my mother, shivering uncontrollably. Everything felt so cold. The air stung my face and lungs every time I breathed in.

My mother squeezed my hand and knelt very close to my face. "Hiccup, can you hear me? Tell me, can you hear me?"

_Let me die, _I begged softly, of anybody who might have been listening. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to have taken the pills and died. I didn't want to be stuck in this pain anymore, mostly coming from my abdomen and my heart. I didn't want it anymore. I wanted to be dead. Maybe if I was dead, things would be better.

"Just relax, Hiccup," my mother ran her fingers lovingly through my hair and I closed my eyes at her touch, even as sirens began wailing in the distance. The sound penetrated the thick cloth covering over my ears, boring into my skull and starting a pounding headache. I gave a little whimper.

"No, it's okay, Hiccup. I'm here. I'm gonna take care of you."

I wanted to be dead, but I held onto these words. If my mother had spoken them, they were true. I had never known her to tell a lie. I needed to believe that she was telling the truth once again. If my mother was here, things wouldn't be so bad. She could take care of me. Up until she'd died, she had taken care of me. And she would continue to do so.

I felt her hands in my hair again, but as the sirens reached an even louder pitch, I groaned, closed my eyes and slept.

I drifted back to the beautiful world and I clung to it. Unchained.

36. Existence

****Chapter 36: Existence****

****A/N:** I'm well aware that this is a filler chapter, yes, shush. But I wanted to work on this story again, so I decided that filler was better than nothing! Right? Oh, also, change of plans, guys. I think that this story is actually far from over. I don't want to end it the way I originally planned to, so it might have as much as fifty to sixty chapters :) of course I might just get lazy and go with the original ending, haha xD we shall see. I have two endings here, and one will push this fic a lottttt longer. It's a nice idea, I guess, but I also kind of wanted to start the new year with a couple stories off my plate, so I might go with the original ending and just write a sequel or something, I don't know. I'm still not even sure whether I want Hiccup to live or not. His funeral would be awesome. But I'm coming to a definite conclusion, I think, about what's going to

happen to him. And to push this chapter over 700 words, I put in some lovely angst about his mother in right there. For a kid who lost her only four years ago, he just doesn't really think about her much in this fic, huh? Well, anyway. Oh, my gosh, guys, look, we're almost at 1,000 reviews! Thank you all so, so, so, so, much! :D And I hit 500 follows! :D You guys rock! To be honest, I don't even know why you like this story. It could definitely use some work xP But hey! I might rewrite it once I get finished with THIS rewrite :D because, to be honest, even though I feel like the rewrite did make the story stronger in some areas, it just weakened the story in others. So.**

* * *

><p>There was something soft beneath me when I entered reality again. Somehow, I knew I still existed, on some level. There was no beautiful world anymore, and pain was rushing back to me, filling my body. I wanted to move around, roll over, do something to try and escape the agony inside me, but my limbs were too heavy. I was too exhausted to stay awake, and yet the pain was so bad I couldn't sleep. A pounding headache was forcing its way into the mix, making my skull feel like it was getting ripped apart.<p>

Through the pain, I heard other noises, too. At one time, there were footsteps, and then at another, there were voices. I longed to hear my mother's among them, but I knew then, with a crushing certainty, that she hadn't really been there. For the first time since I'd entered reality, I opened my eyes, startled into full consciousness by bright lights. I started to cry.

I didn't do anything dramatic, like burying my head in my hands and sobbing â€" I just stared up at those bright lights and cried, letting tears silently drip down my face, because my mother had never really been there after all. Whoever had spoken to me so gently and lovingly hadn't really been my mother, and the knowledge crushed me. It didn't make any sense â€" I knew she was dead, I knew she had been dead for years, but seeing her again just made the knowledge of her death that much more painful.

I don't think anyone around me noticed, anyway. Nobody told me to stop, and nobody hit me for crying, so I guess my dad wasn't there. The soft voices kept drifting farther and farther away from me, like they were leaving me behind, or like I was leaving themâ€|

The realization that I was about to die only made the tears' numbers and rate increase, streaming down my cheeks and wetting the soft pillow beneath my head. Vaguely, I registered that something was wrong â€" I should not have had a pillow. The floor of our kitchen didn't have a pillow. The floor of our kitchen wasn't this soft, and the lights above weren't supposed to be that bright.

If I wasn't in our kitchen, where was I, exactly? I tried to sit up, to raise my head and look around, but a gentle hand on my chest prevented me from doing so. "Hiccup, sweetheart, don't try to move. You need rest."

The voice sounded like my mother's, but this time I knew it wasn't; I had never heard her use the word 'sweetheart'. I looked up and met the speaker's gaze: clear blue eyes, tainted with concern. A pretty woman, blonde and skinny and currently looking more than a little

concerned for my wellbeing. I struggled against her hand for a few seconds longer, but she spoke to me again, in that voice so like my mother's, and the tears blurred my vision and fell again.

"I want my mother," I sobbed, but the woman was right, I really shouldn't have been sitting up â€" my arms were too weak to support my body right now, shaking from the effort. I fell back against the soft white something beneath me, listening to it rustle and crinkle. I closed my eyes against the bright lights, tears cascading out from under my lids. "I want my mother," I repeated, beginning to shake, not just in my arms, but all over. I wanted my mother, more than anything else in the world right then. But on that tiny level of existence that I currently lay on, I registered that she wasn't there with me, that she couldn't be there with me, that she was dead. She was gone, and no amount of crying could bring her back. I lowered my head back onto the pillow, too far gone now to care that we weren't supposed to have pillows or pretty blondes in our kitchen anymore. I just kept crying, and even though she tried to comfort me, I didn't care â€" I just ignored her. I thought I heard her calling for someone else, but I slipped out of reality again. The beautiful world was gone, the angels no longer sang, but darkness was good, too. At least with darkness, you didn't have to think anymore.

So I slipped gladly out of existence again, praying this would be my last time awake.

37. Unplug Me

****Chapter 37: Unplug Me ****

****A/N:** I've been bombarding my readers on Unbreakable really badly xD xD so I decided to do Overachiever instead. I wrote this listening to Evanescence's songs. 'Oceans' 'Swimming Home' 'Bring Me to Life'... you'll see Oceans cropped up in there xD xD xD And oh my god, one thousand reviews :DDDDD I can't believe I hit this many :3 this was almost a one shot, remember? Way back in the distant land of 2013 (horrible writing time for me, actually - I was an awful writer back then holy crap like omg) Anyway, I reread this story and omg! I've spent so long hating it, but you know what? I like it. I freaking. Like. This. ******

* * *

><p>Voices.<p>

They sounded loud, like people were talking right above me. I thought I was dead at first, but the bright lights were fluorescent, and I didn't think God had electric lights in heaven. So I resigned myself to the fact that, for now, I was still alive. The people above me, they were saying words that had meaning deep in my soul, but they didn't reach my ears quite right. They just sounded kind of garbled, like I was listening to them with water in my ears.

"Maybe rehabilitation for his eating disorder?" one of them asked quietly. The other agreed slowly.

"What about his father?" a new voice spoke, inquiring anxiously.

"The man's completely off the map. He's not answering his phone, and according to Oceans, he wasn't in the waiting room for longer than ten minutes before disappearing."

I sat upright. I might have been barely in my head, I might have been unable to breathe and shaking from a sudden chill that gripped my body, but I kept my eyes fixed on the people in white coats at the foot and head of my bed, twisting to look at them all. "What's going on? What's happened to my father?"

"Sweetheartâ€¦" It was that blonde woman again, lips parted in a glass smile, ready to deliver the iron verdict of the only solid thing in the world to grip onto. "Slow down. Take a breath. Rest."

"No, what's happened to my father?" I was suddenly scared. I might have felt angry with him before doing the deed, but I never intended for him to get hurt by what had happened. And what if he had hurt somebody else? What if he had gotten drunk, and started hurting somebody else, one of the people in the room right now?

But no, I realized, looking at them all quickly. I knew enough about my father to know that those fists left nasty marks. None of these people were bruised â€" they all looked a little surprised by my sudden speech, but they looked unhurt.

"Hiccup," the doctor moved forward suddenly, putting a hand to my shoulder. Heavily built, like my father â€" when he reached for me, I couldn't help flinching back. He seemed to notice, because he dropped his hand. "Your father is not available for you at the moment."

Here, at last, was all I'd wanted. The truth. Not somebody fussing over me, or whispering words like "rehabilitation" like they thought I couldn't hear. "Why isn't he available? Has something happened to him, is he hurt?"

"He was unhurt," one of the nurses started to speak, but I interrupted.

"What do you mean, was?"

"You need to rest," the doctor persisted. So much for telling me the truth. "You've been through a lot in these past twenty-four hours, Hiccup. You need to lay down and sleep."

I don't remember anything after that, so I'm guessing they put me to sleep without my knowledge and when I awoke again, the hospital room was dark, completely dark. At any other time, I would have been scared. But I couldn't dredge up enough feeling to be scared, so I just rolled over and tried to fall back asleep. No luck. I couldn't stop thinking about my father, and what might have happened to him. He didn't deserve whatever they were doing to him. I couldn't think past this. I'd tried to do the world a favor by killing myself, and somehow I'd ended up in an even worse mess than before. I couldn't even kill myself properly. I was so stupid. I was so screwed up, so messed up that I'd tried to kill myself and for a long while, I'd happily considered this thought. I was so goddamn useless, and I was stupid, stupid for thinking I could do anything right, stupid for entering that art competition, stupid for not reading the directions

on the bottle before taking them, stupid for breaking down in Ms. Delaney's class when I should have just kept my head down and turned off my thinking entirely. I had become so good at lying, at covering up and pretending not to be sad, or angry. Why hadn't I been able to do it then, to hide everything I was thinking and feeling?

I remembered her telling me that I was a pot, that soon enough I would boil over, and I had. And I'd been wrong when I'd said that I'd boiled over quietly, too. This, the doctors and nurses telling me to rest, me lying on the kitchen floor vomiting, my father staring at me, Astrid's blue eyes looking right through me— This was not quiet.

I closed my eyes, listening to the quiet beeping of monitors and machines all around me, the only things keeping me hooked up to life. I wondered if, when I slipped into sleep this time, anybody would do the world a favor and unplug me.

* * *

><p>When I awoke again, the lights weren't dimmer by any means, but I could now look up at them without gaining a pounding headache to add to my discomforts. Nobody was at my bedside, and I couldn't help but look at the empty space, all this space, all this space and room I had to share, and suddenly I felt like crying again. I had space to share. I had room, but I wouldn't let anybody past the front door. The last person who'd gone beyond the front door had taken over the space and filled it with bruises and Xs and beatings, terrible words whispered in my ears, telling me over and over that if I ever told anyone about this, he'd kill me.<p>

I had shut my door then, locked it up tight, bolted it securely so I no longer ran the risk of anybody ever getting inside. Every time someone had gotten close to figuring out the pass codes, I changed the locks. And now, because of that, here I was alone, in a hospital bed, having fallen so far that not even my dad could see me anymore. My dad, who had fallen farther than I thought possible. I had fallen farther than him.

The door opened suddenly. Somebody else entered the empty space. I swallowed, lifting my eyes to meet the doctor's. The man who looked like my father, but wasn't. Did he know that the last person who had entered my emotional empty space had beaten me and taken every good thing I had, twisted it until it was something perverted and ugly?

The doctor — his name tag dangled in front of my eyes for just moments before he sat down in the chair beside my bed, and I saw that it had something with a D in it — and then he seated himself. "Hiccup."

"Yes?" I looked up from the bed, meeting his gaze again. His eyes weren't like my father's at all. Where my dad's were cold and hard and angry and gray, the doctor's were kind and gentle and blue.

"Ms. Lydia is going to come talk to you in a few minutes," he said, clearly choosing his words carefully. "And she's going to ask you a few questions, inquire about the state of your emotional and mental health—"

"Is she going to ask if I'm crazy?" I interrupted. "Because to be honest, I don't really think I am."

The doctor shook his head. "I don't mean mental health in that way, Hiccup. What I mean is, she's just going to ask you a few questions, and I urge you to answer as honestly as you can, okay?"

I frowned, tugging at the hospital gown that covered me. "Whoâ€|who is Ms. Lydia, sir?"

"She's just checking up on you," he promised. "There's nothing to be afraid of, I promise."

"What, is she gonna give me a shot?" I tilted my head to the side. "Because I don't need anyone to hold my hand while that's being done, sir. I'm fine."

I guess my brain was moving sluggishly from all the medications I'd taken, but I didn't connect the dots until the door swung open again and a woman with long brown hair and dark eyes came striding into the room. She didn't wear a white coat, like the other doctors and nurses I'd seen here â€" she was dressed in black, and looked oddly out of place in such a brightly lit room.

The doctor quickly vacated the seat as the woman offered me a smile, taking the seat he'd just left.

"Hello, Hiccup," she began speaking as the doctor left the room, shuffling some papers around on her clipboard and adjusting her skirt. "I just wanted to ask you a few questions â€" is that okay?"

I shrugged. "I guess."

"The doctors have been examining your medical history, and the reports they've gotten back on you over the last few days," she explained, taking a pencil out from behind her ear and scribbling on the clipboard. "According to them, you're very underweight?" She ended it openly, like a question.

I just stared at her.

She drew her chair a little closer to the bed. "Don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

Ms. Lydia wasn't a doctor, not even a therapist, I realized as I regarded her. She was a social worker.

38. Pieces

****Chapter 38: Pieces ****

****A/N:** Hi, everyone :3 Here's a new chapter. I'm so happy that so many of you enjoy this story and connect with Hiccup and it helps you! It's my dream to help someone with my writing, so :3 Also I feel like it's the mark of a good writer to affect someone, and I seem to affect a lot of people with this story so I have my fingers crossed that that means I actually am a good writer. I know that the book series for HTTYD and Harry Potter both affected me a great deal, and

Cressida Cowell and J.K. Rowling are two of the best writers I've ever read, so... **

**Also, speaking of books that affect me, have any of you ever read Last Night I Sang to the Monster by Benjamin Alire Seanz? Great book! :D It's my favorite, right up there with Saint Iggy by K.L. Going and I Funny by James Patterson :3 Also I really like 'Fire' but I forget who it's by. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter. **

* * *

><p>I remember when I was younger, I used to love puzzles.<p>

Maybe not so much when I was younger, but right around ten and eleven, I started getting really into them. The pieces just fit so perfectly together, and it was so satisfying to watch them click into place, so easily and suddenly. My favorites were the huge ones, the two thousand piece ones that took up my whole bedroom floor. I would take it out of the box, start assembling it late at night, when Dad was gone to find some alcohol wherever he could, and then, when I started getting tired, I'd just abandon it to sleep. Dad was never around to set me a bedtime, so I just stayed up until I got tired. It was as simple as that.

I would come home from school every day and, if my dad wasn't there, I'd go upstairs and start working on the puzzle again, pulling out piece after tiny piece and struggling to find its place in the great big equation. After a little while, though, puzzles started bothering me. I know it was stupid and childish, but I just didn't like them anymore. All those pieces belonged somewhere. And I was the odd piece, the square peg in the round hole that couldn't fit in anywhere, but tried its hardest.

The puzzles made me feel lonelier than ever, so I stopped them. I dismantled the one I'd currently been trying to put together and I shoved it back in the closet and I forgot about them. I didn't want to feel any worse than I already did, with the kids at school bullying me worse than ever and my dad coming home drunk sometimes and hitting me, and what with spending most nights crying about my mom. I stopped working on the puzzles, and that was about the time that it occurred to me that maybe my dad didn't love me because my grades weren't good enough, so I replaced puzzles with schoolwork. I needed some way to escape all the tormenting thoughts in my head, and reading complicated algebraic equations or English verse helped.

I hadn't thought about the puzzles in years but now, sitting here, in this hospital bed, I remembered them. Because when Ms. Lydia sat down and smiled at me, I knew what she was here for. She was here to put together the puzzle. She wanted to find the piece that represented me, probably a poor, lost, wandering soul in her mind, and she wanted to find the place where the piece fit, and stick it in there. But of course, there's no place for a mistake as unfixable as me, so I knew she wouldn't find a place for me, even if she searched. I could feel my walls going up, my hands clenching into fists the moment she offered me that sickening smile.

She was trying to find a place for me, and I didn't want it. I wanted to stay on the outskirts. Maybe when I first realized where I was, I wanted to find a way inside, make a friend, maybe, but I'd become comfortable with my quiet, friendless solitude. Friends asked

questions about bruises, but walls and Xs did not.

I didn't smile for her. I just stared at her, waiting for her to speak. She seemed a little awkward about the fact that I didn't say anything, like she actually expected me to say something. But what was there for me to say? If she was determined to find a place for me, then she wouldn't listen, whatever I told her.

"Now, the doctors have said you're very underweight," she repeated softly, tapping her clipboard with a finger like saying it again would make me open up and spill the floodgates or something. I tightened my lips. Not going to happen.

"So, the first question I need to ask you is do you get enough to eat? At home, at school? Does your father provide you with food, and does he provide you money for the cafeteria food?"

"Yes." I nodded once, but the question wasn't so bad. I'd lied about my weight and skinniness a million times over the years " I could do it without even flinching now.

"Do youâ€|" The social worker seemed a little wrong-footed now, like she hadn't expected my response to be so plain, like she wanted me to say more. "Do you deny yourself foodâ€|often?"

_Only when I've done something wrong. _I swallowed, struggling with my response. My lips did not want to form the word no. "I don't know what you mean," I said instead. I could feel everything slipping out of my hands, my control. My dad kept me mostly under his control with his fists and his threats, but I had control of a lot more than most of the kids in my school. If I wanted to stay up until four o' clock in the morning, my dad didn't care. He'd wander in an hour later and wake me up by smashing things around and slurring his words. He just didn't care, so I had control over my life. There were only certain things I had no control over, like the food and whether I deserved it, and school and whether I felt like going the next day. I could have been so sick I could barely move, and I would still have no choice but to go.

The social worker pulled me out of my thoughts by leaning forward in her chair, clasping her hands together. I expected her to tell me something stupid like, 'I think you do know' but she surprised me. She took me literally, and actually began explaining what she meant. "Do you deny yourself food or continue to go hungry even when you're starving?"

I wanted to be angry with her. I wanted to force her out of the room, out the door, and out of my life and leave me alone with my empty space and the world that I used to live in, before this happened. The world where only the walls knew my secrets, or cared that I was thin enough to count my own ribs.

I bit my lip and I shook my head. Dr. Montgomery had tried to get me to confess to an eating disorder, and now this woman was, too? It wasn't going to happen. I did not have an eating disorder.

Ms. Lydia pursed her lips, like she'd been expecting me to say something different. What else could I say? I couldn't tell her the truth, because then she'd probably think that I was messed up, and she'd think that she'd found my place in the puzzle, and that my

place was therapy and try to stick me in that, only therapy wasn't my place in this puzzle. I did not have a place. I simply existed, drifting aimlessly by everyone else, already half-dead.

As the silence stretched on, I saw something in Ms. Lydia's face â€” a kind of firming of the mouth, a hardness coming into her gaze. She was trying a new tack. Okay. I could live with that. I could lie my way out of a lot of situations. Denial was the only thing I was really good at.

"Has your father ever mistreated you?" Her voice was unexpectedly soft, and I glanced up at her in surprise. She was just staring at me, like she wasn't sure what she was seeing, and needed a few seconds to figure it out.

My eyes narrowed, and I opened my mouth to deny it, to ask who she thought she was, but just as I readied myself, a memory crept into my mind. Astrid, standing across from me by the counter in the cafeteria, demanding answers to the Xs. Me, petrified and stammering, going instantly on the defensive because I was too scared to do anything else.

I took a breath to calm myself. Lying worked, but only when you stayed calm about it. You couldn't get worked up or upset. That was my mistake with Astrid. "Iâ€¦I don't know what you mean," I repeated, because it was the first thing that entered my head, and any more hesitation and she would start to get suspicious.

"Has he ever hit you, or threatened you? Does he hurt you on purpose?"

It was stupid. I had lived with it happening for years. My father, the only piece of family I had left, all I had in the cruel world that had ripped my family so cruelly, leaving my mother to drift into death, my father to drift into alcohol, and leaving me to just driftâ€¦he was all I'd had, and he'd beat me. I'd kept silent. I didn't cry. I knew better than to cry after awhile, because crying made him mad. Everything about me made him mad, but crying was the worst. I learned to take it mostly in silence, and this, above all, just a simple question, was enough to push me over the edge. I wanted to cry then.

But I didn't. I told her the truth, the reason I was here in the first place. Because in the end, it wasn't my father's fault, and it had never had been. It was mine. "No."

39. Dead

****Chapter 39: Dead****

****A/N:** Well, for one, I know Hiccup changes his song and dance quite a bit in this chapter, but that's because he's lying his ass off. He's trying to cover himself and his father, and so he has to keep changing his story to keep it realistic, and make the social worker happy. (Meanwhile, the social worker finally gets her crap together and asks real social worker questions...) ******

****Anyway,** to the people who go to therapy, please don't be offended by how Hiccup looks down on it. To him, it's a sign of shame, having

to go to therapy. It's like announcing that you're weak, and you have problems. I, personally, have no problems with the people who go to therapy, but I really hope I didn't offend anyone all the same. Anyway, the holidays got super crazy, so have an extra-long chapter to make up for that! **

* * *

><p>I didn't really know what the social worker wanted me to say, but this didn't seem to be it. She kept tapping her clipboard with her pencil eraser irritably, and then flicking her eyes away from me again. The part of me that always felt an automatic need to please adults reacted badly to this, but I forced myself to stay silent. I wanted to be nice to this woman, but at the same time, I couldn't ignore the reason she was here.<p>

"Hiccup," she leaned forward suddenly, as if sharing a secret with me that no one else knew, "how do you feel about living with your father?"

I blinked. "What?"

"How do you feel about it? When you walk in the front door every day and see him, what does that make you feel?"

I scowled at the question "I was in a hospital bed after trying to kill myself, but I hadn't sunk so low as therapy yet. And I couldn't even really answer that question anyway, because my dad was never home when I was, or at least not very often. So I already wasn't sure what to say to that, and at the same time, I didn't think anybody had asked me about my feelings for a really long time. Feelings were feelings, right? You had them, but you stuffed them out of sight like old childhood books or something. You certainly didn't talk about them, and you definitely didn't talk voluntarily. So I shrugged. "I feel fine."

Ms. Lydia smiled, but it was a little condescending. "Fine? That's all?"

"What do you want me to say?" I snapped, folding my arms over my chest "the hospital gown fluttered in the breeze from my movement, and I uncomfortably pulled the garment farther down, to cover everything. "That I'm over the moon whenever I see him? What more is there to say about him, he's my dad."

But there were things to say about him. I could talk about how much I longed for him to love me, or ask the social worker if getting better grades would win me the affection I so desperately craved. Yet I knew saying these things would only get me in a worse fix than before. According to the snippets of conversation I'd heard from the doctors and nurses, my dad had disappeared from the waiting room after only being there for ten minutes. That was good. At least the social worker couldn't question him. Not if she couldn't track him down.

I shuddered to think how a conversation between a social worker and my drunk father would go. Would my dad be sober enough to put on a façade, like he was when he came to discharge me? Or would he be so drunk that he didn't even remember being there? Would he demand to know what she was talking about or worse, reveal everything? My dad and I had walked a razor edge of lies and pain since I was ten years

old. He couldn't " wouldn't " destroy what we had so carefully built, would he?

I swallowed uncomfortably as Ms. Lydia regarded me. Her intelligent eyes appeared to see more than I wanted them to see. I shifted a little, the gown fluttering in the breeze again.

It seemed a long time before she spoke again. "You know, the doctors said they found a few bruises when they undressed you."

I lowered my eyes to the blanket, feeling shame beginning to flush my face. This was an obstacle I had overlooked, although I could see now that it had been stupid to do so. Of course doctors would question bruises. "I'm really clumsy." The lie that had helped me survive for the past four years suddenly seemed weak and feeble now. "Uh, you can ask my classmates, they'll all tell you. I walked into a door a couple days ago." Almost unconsciously, I reached up to finger the bruise on my cheek. "It wasn't pretty."

Ms. Lydia pursed her lips. "It wasn't just bruises on your face, Hiccup," she pointed out. To my surprise, she reached up and gently enclosed my hand in hers, bringing it down into my lap, away from the bruise. I couldn't hide it without my hand or a curtain of hair. "There were a lot of fresh ones covering your torso." She gestured to the hospital gown.

I hadn't thought of when my dad beat me after discharging me from the hospital. Sure, it had been painful, but nothing had felt broken, and I'd heard no sounds of snapping bones. Nothing required my immediate medical attention at the time, so I'd let myself forget about it. What a stupid thing to do. Couldn't I do anything right? It wasn't going to be Dad destroying everything we'd built.

I forced a little laugh out of my mouth, but it sounded terrified, even to my own ears. A laugh of lies. "Oh, that. I'm sorry that worried you guys." I even tried to smile for her " I honestly did. It threatened to slip off my face, but I had not come this far just to cry like a baby now. There would be no crying, not while people were in the room. "Like I said, I'm really clumsy, and a couple days ago, I fell down the stairs. My backpack was heavy, and the straps are fraying, and I was just tired and not really paying attention to my surroundings. Next thing I knew, my backpack had flown out of my hands and I'm on the floor at the bottom of the stairs." I made myself give another little chuckle. I had never known how good I could be at forcing laughter. No one ever cared enough to listen for my laugh before.

Ms. Lydia didn't laugh; she frowned at me, not like she disapproved or disbelieved my story, but more like she was trying to figure me out. And like I said, when people try to figure me out " I change the locks. So that's what I did then. I changed them.

"I'm sorry for overreacting when you first started asking questions," I added. "I mean, my father is a really good man, he just works all the time these days, to bring in enough money for us. And when people act like that's a bad thing, I tend to get defensive."

"Uh-huh" Ms. Lydia nodded again, her eyes narrowed this time. "I just have a few more questions, then."

Uh-oh. She hadn't recognized the clear dismissal. Like she would ever take a dismissal from a kid anyway, but I'd had hopes. And she was still sitting there.

"Okay." I nodded and swallowed, trying to wet my dry throat. The worst of it was over, right? She had asked about my dad, and it was always hardest when the conversation got around to him. I could handle anything now.

"Why did you take so many medications, Hiccup? Mixing them isn't safe, and surely a boy of fourteen would know that, with all the warnings adults put out about them these days."

Except that. I couldn't handle that. My confidence crumbled, and I started stammering worse than ever. What did I say? What could I say? "Umâ€¦w-well, I wasn't trying to get high or anything, if that's what you were thinking," I said weakly.

Ms. Lydia shook her head. "But I don't think you were trying to get high."

If I really wanted to get high, I could have just waited until one of Dad's druggie friends brought over a load of cocaine, or maybe even heroine. I didn't see a lot of heroine passing through the house â€" it was too hard to get, from what I heard and understood. But of course, I couldn't say any of this, either. "Well, what other reason could I have for taking so many medicines?" I asked gruffly.

"Well, how about you tell me?" Ms. Lydia suggested casually, and I realized I had walked right into her trap. And I didn't even think I could talk myself out of this one.

"Umâ€¦" I would have thought my reasoning would have been obvious! Hello, I was a mistake! It was written all over my face that I wasn't good enough, so why was this woman forcing me to admit it? I'd already admitted it to myself a hundred times over. Why did I have to do it again?

"Hiccup?" Ms. Lydia gently pressed.

I closed my eyes. To my horror, disbelief, and fury, I felt a tear stinging my left eye as I closed it. For a second, I sat there in the silence, listening to my thoughts trying to assemble themselves. I was used to quiet, but not this kind of quiet. It was almost peaceful here, in this dark nothingness. Kind of like the peace I'd found when I'd thought I was dead, except now I realized how pathetic it was that it took my near-death to find peace. I'd been okay with being pathetic when I was popping pills left and right, so why was I crying about it now? I didn't have any reason to be crying! I just needed to stop being such a baby, otherwise Ms. Lydia was really going to noticeâ€¦

I turned away from her, using a quick second to wipe my eyes with the back of my hand before turning to face her again. I hoped I'd erased any evidence of tears, but there was no way to tell. "I don't know," I said abruptly. "I don't know why I took them."

"You took several different and incompatible medications," Ms. Lydia began, with an obvious sarcastic note in her voice, "and you don't know why?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "Not a clue."

"Hiccup, you have to have had a reason behind your actions."

"Well, I don't. Sorry, go fix somebody else." There I went again, changing the locks. Ms. Lydia must have guessed why I took them, but she wanted to hear me say it. She wanted to hear me say that I'd tried to off myself.

"Hiccup, I'm trying to help you." She sounded annoyed now, and though I wouldn't look at her, I felt my resolve weakening. I tended to trust women more than men, but women had come into my house and done their fair share to me. One really drunk woman even mistook me for her husband once and started trying to grope me while I screamed for my dad. He never came, then. But as I sat there, I started wondering if she was going to hit me if I didn't comply. Should I just tell her, and get it over with? I didn't want her to hit me. I was tired of people hitting me. I lifted my head to face hers, and what I saw confirmed my worst fears: she looked angry, impatient. She'd probably wanted to fix me quickly, and I'd ruined it all.

I waited for it, the blow, but it didn't come. _Maybe it would be easier, _I reasoned with myself. _Just tell her, Hiccup, get it over with, and then she'll leave you alone, and she won't hit you. _

I lifted my eyes to meet hers. She raised her eyebrows hopefully, clearly waiting for me to speak.

"I don't know." My voice came out a whisper. "I justâ€¦didn't want to live anymore." There it was, the truth. The only time I had spoken it throughout this whole conversation, damned from the start.

Her eyes softened, and she tucked a stray piece of hair behind one ear as she considered me. I hoped she wouldn't hit me. My dad wasn't around to punish me, but that didn't mean I wanted this woman to take his place. "Why don't you want to live?"

I had a question for her: why did she keep twisting my words? I spoke in past tense, she spoke in present tense, like I'd told her I didn't want to live anymore in the _present_, just now. I hadn't. I'd said I'd felt like that before. Granted, my opinion hadn't changed much, but still.

"B-because," I stuttered, trying to grasp onto any semblance of an answer. I realized now that I pretty much depended on her asking me 'yes-or-no' questions, because at least then, I knew what to say. Does your dad hit you? No. Are you happy with him? Yes. But the moment she'd asked how I'd felt about him, I'd become tongue-tied. Now, I had no idea how to respond to this question, even though it was fairly simple. Most people would never even have to answer it.

I wish I had just died, quick and clean and painless. Nice and neat.

"Becauseâ€¦I mean, look at me." I gestured to myself, a broken-down mess in a hospital bed, wearing a gown that barely covered everything, covered in bruises from my father's latest beating, the mark of a mistake prominent on my wrist, my body still healing from when I mixed so many different medicines. I was a disaster, and

everybody around me knew it. "If you were me, you'd want to die, too."

Ms. Lydia wrote something on her clipboard. I wondered what she was saying about me, but I didn't dare ask. She lifted her gaze to mine. "But I'm not you."

Be grateful for that.

"So please explain why you want to die to me."

"Because," I said shakily, knowing that the quickest way out now was the truth. "Because I'm already dead. I already feel dead. I thought I might as well finish the job."

40. A Little Weaker

****Chapter 40: A Little Weaker****

****A/N:** Well, this is chapter 40. Oh, look, wow, chapter 40. Holy cow, I can't believe I did it! Chapter 40! To think, the original version was almost over by chapter 23. That is incredible. And 1143 reviews. I am in complete shock. So, have a chapter. It's short, but I like it. Well, 'like' is a relative term. I like the end. I don't like the middle, or the beginning. ******

* * *

><p>There was a second of silence. I thought maybe I'd finally done it, astonished her so thoroughly that she would quit trying to "fix" me, or whatever. But then her voice came again, surprisingly gentler than before. "But you're not dead, Hiccup."

"Don't you think I know that?" My voice wouldn't stay steady, and even to my own ears, it didn't sound like me. I'd never had to work so hard to make sure it didn't break before. "And don't you think, with every breath that passes through these lungs, that I regret that?"

Ms. Lydia didn't make a sound. Maybe that had convinced her to stop trying to fix me? I mean, at what point was this woman going to realize she was dealing with a hopeless case? But she still spoke again. She hadn't given up just yet. "Why, Hiccup? Why do you regret living?"

"I don't want it." My voice really did threaten to break then, the tremor steadily growing louder, demanding to be noticed. I swiped at my eyes with the back of my hand, but they were bone dry. "I don't want to live anymore, Ms. Lydia, I don't want to be here anymore." I couldn't look her in the eye when I talked. How could I look somebody in the eye and calmly discuss my recent suicide attempt with them? "I want to be dead."

"Can you€|can you give me a straight answer? Tell me why you want to be dead?"

"I want my mother." My vision blurred. The tears were coming, and there was absolutely no stopping them, or the flow of words. "I want my mother, I miss my mother, and it hurts, I want my dad back the way

he was before he hitâ€œ"

Shocked by my own stupidity, although I really shouldn't have been by that point, I froze. Completely and totally. The only thing about me that still moved were the tears, trickling stubbornly down my cheeks. My hand hovered halfway over my mouth, as if I thought I could catch the words in my fingers before they reached the social worker's ears.

"Before he hit you?" she guessed, leaning forward a little bit in her chair. I guess I expected her to look excited â€œ" after all, her job was to sniff out child abuse, right? â€œ" but she just looked kind of sad. Her pen seemed to jump in her hand until the writing end was pressing closer and closer to the clipboard.

"N-no," I stuttered, gasping through my tears, trying frantically to quell my sobs. "It's n-not what you think, it's not abuse, it'sâ€œ|it'sâ€œ|I _deserve_ it."

That was the longest silence of my life. I'd finally silenced Ms. Lydia and all her questions, but at what price? I couldn't hold her gaze â€œ" I would keep looking at her, and then glancing away, unable to stand the look she was giving me. The strange thing was, it wasn't pity. It was just a kind of deep, sad, searching look. She was still searching for something from me. I'd already spilled my truths, and there was no going back on them. I couldn't stop her from doing whatever she did next. I wished with all my heart that I were dead.

"You don't deserve it, Hiccup. Whatever he does to you, you don't deserve it."

I fisted my hands, pressing them into my eyes to hopefully stop the tears. I didn't want to cry anymore, because I was so pathetically weak that whenever anything went wrong, all I did was cry. But that was all I could do, because I was such a stupid, useless mistake that all I could do was cry after I made a mess, I couldn't pick it up. All I could do was cry.

So I gave up trying to stop the tears and instead I just shook my head at Ms. Lydia because everyone should know that I deserved what my dad did to me. She looked a little like she wanted to do something to comfort me, but she hesitated on the point of touching me. As a sort of compromise, I guess, she placed her hand on the bed railing, a little halfway comfort.

This only succeeded in making me cry harder as I swiped at my eyes, the stubborn tears still lurking there. My eyes had been dry a few minutes ago â€œ" but that had all changed when I'd started talking about my mother. I could contemplate the fact that my very existence was a mistake, that everything about me was worthless, but one little thought of my mom, and I cried every time, without fail.

"Hiccup, listen to me. You do not deserve it. You don't deserve this, you don't deserve it when he hits you."

I wiped at my cheeks now, damp from all the tears. Every word that she spoke hurt me, like she was driving a knife into my chest, deeper and deeper. Killing me slowly with words that I knew weren't true. I dropped my head into my hands, unable to support my shaking self any

longer. I felt myself falling numbly back against the pillows, resting my damp cheek on one of them, feeling tears trickling still out of my eyes, falling onto the pillow now.

"Iâ€¦I do," I managed at last, finding the breath and ability to speak. "You're lying to me, stop lying, I just want to get out of here, I want to go _home_â€¦" Another burst of pain so intense that it was almost physical ripped its way through me, and I could feel myself slowly losing control, steadily releasing the wheel of this car I had been driving, all this time. I'd reached an icy bend in the road, and suddenly everything was spinning out of my control. Everything hurt, and the deep sobs that all this crying withdrew from me made my chest ache.

Every word I'd said was true. I did want to go home, I wanted to get out of here, I wanted to go back, not to my house, but to wherever home was, wherever it used to be. Flying my kite in the park during the summer, listening to my mother playing the piano, feeling her gentle hands stroking my hair, listening to her heartbeat, thumping in a rhythm to match my own. That was home. And God, it hurt so bad to realize that I didn't even really have a true home anymore, it just hurt so much. My sobs became raw, ugly things, straight from my gut and my chest and most importantly, my broken and imperfect heart, the cause of all my pain.

I had never hated myself more than I hated myself then.

Ms. Lydia's hands were tight around the bed railing. "You're alright, Hiccup." Her voice was so, so gentle. It broke me, without ever touching me at all. "You're alright. No one's going to hurt you again."

It was such a beautiful option, the option of no more pain. But she was offering me a chance to live unpunished, holding my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop, knowing always, in the back of my mind, that I deserved no food and every pain imaginable. I'd created my own option with the pills, but that option had been stolen from me. I just wanted to die. I didn't want to live unhurt, I didn't want to "recover" or "heal" or go to therapy. I just wanted to _die_.

I felt my world breaking, shattering into a million pieces around me. And always, I was left. Picking through the wreckage, picking up the broken pieces, searching for a way to put it back together. As always, I was the only person left. Everyone around me, even the people who didn't care about me and had no reason to stay, everyone was leaving. I couldn't hold onto anyone. They were all gone. Maybe they were never there in the first place. Maybe I'd made it up, the possibility of them caring about me. Maybe I'd made it all up, the fact that they were even in my world in the first place. I just wanted to die.

And I'd tried, I'd tried so hard to make it painless and nice and neat, and keep everyone out of it so my father would never have to pick up the pieces, the way he'd made me do a thousand times. And now this. I just wanted to die. I didn't want to pick up the pieces anymore. I wanted them to shatter around me, all the safe protection and solitude I had built around myself to just break apart. I didn't want to live in this numb fog anymore. I didn't want to be alone, in a broken, shattering world that would always have to be rebuilt, a little weaker than before.

41. Sincerity

Chapter 41: Sincerity

**A/N: Well, it's been awhile, huh? Sorry about that. Lost the inspiration and all. BUT I SHALL PUSH ON. I SHALL DEFEY WRITER'S BLOCK, FIND MY MUSE, WRANGLE HIM INTO SUBMISSION AND CONGRATULATE HIM ON A JOB WELL DONE. This is not really a job well done, to be honest. Hiccup feels a little too trusting to be himself in this chapter, but at the same time, I feel like I'm making him too paranoid. It's a cruel paradox, really. But anyway, I must go. I'm bored. **

* * *

><p>I kept expecting Ms. Lydia to grow impatient with me as I wiped at my eyes, trying to remove all evidence of tears. I didn't want the doctors and nurses to know the kid who'd tried to off himself had bawled to the social worker. Things were already bad enough without my second breakdown in a week being the object of discussion.<p>

Ms. Lydia opened her mouth to speak, maybe to deliver more words of comfort or simply to ask me another question, I wasn't sure, but the door opened before she could, and that blonde nurse poked her head in, pushing her curls off her face as she talked. "Hiccup, you haveâ€"oh, excuse me."

Ms. Lydia was instantly all business again, straightening her black skirt and standing from her chair. "No, that's quite alright, you go on. What were you saying?"

The nurse turned back to me, edging farther into the room. "Hiccup, you have visitors."

"Visitors?" I repeated, mystified. "For me? Are you sure?" I couldn't think of anybody who actually wanted to talk to me. I cut my eyes back to the social worker, hesitating, wondering if she would be okay with visitors, whoever they were.

"It's alright," she assured me, as if answering my unasked question. "Iâ€"I have no more questions for you, anyway. I just need to step out for a minute, I'll be right backâ€"!"

Relief swept through me as I watched her walk away. She'd actually fooled me into thinking she cared about my wellbeing for a second there, but I should have known better. I was a mistake, and who could care about me? She didn't care enough to do anything about my father, and although the idea of seeing him again made cold dread settle in my stomach, I knew the alternative, never seeing him again, was so much worse.

Remembering the nurse, I forced myself to look at her, blinking a couple times. "Umâ€"visitors?"

"Yes, shall I let them in?"

"Uhâ€"sure?" I hoped these visitors were people I actually wanted to see. I didn't particularly feel like being dragged out by my dad, but I knew he wasn't going to show anyway, so no worries there.

I kept trying to think of people who would actually want to visit me as the nurse walked away, her shoes clacking on the hospital floor with every step. I was still coming up empty when she came back, leading not just one or two, but three people. It was so unbelievable that these people would actually visit me that I wondered vaguely if I really had died, and all of this was just a drug-induced hallucination, but when Ruffnut gave a squeal and threw her arms around me, it felt real. Her skin against mine felt real.

And the pathetic thing was, it made me happy. My heart literally danced in my chest because _these people had come to see me._ Here were three people who had not left me with only empty space, who had not walked out of my shattering world just when I needed them most.

I didn't know whether to hug her back or not, but eventually, I did, wrapping my arms around her tightly, reveling in the feeling of being touched. It had been so long since somebody had hugged me like thisâ€|

"Let him breathe, Ruff," Toothless looked pale and tired, but he still managed a small grin at me as he pulled teasingly on Ruffnut's braid, pretending to yank her off me. The normally bouncing ball of boundless energy appeared too worn down to do much else.

"Sorry!" Ruffnut obediently collapsed in the chair beside my bed, like she thought her legs would soon fail to support her.

I couldn't help but smile at them. I'd thought they didn't care about me, but they couldn't have come all this way without caring, at least a little bit. They couldn't only be doing this out of pityâ€|could they? Doubt gnawed at my heart. Could they really be acting so nice because they felt sorry for me?

"We were really worried," Ruffnut added, resting her hand over mine, linking our fingers. "They wouldn't even let us back here for a really long time, because you were asleep so often and you were in such critical condition, oh, god, Hiccup, _what happened?_" The words seemed to bubble out of her as if she could no longer keep them in.

The smile disappeared from my face as quickly as it had come. Oh, right. I should have known. They didn't really care. I knew it. They just wanted to come gawk at the freak show, assess the damage, then spread it to everybody else. Going back to school would be hell.

"Well, uhâ€|" I hesitated, then sighed, letting my shoulders drop. "I'd, umâ€|really rather not talk about it." And it was true. If they were just going to go tell everyone at school what had happened the moment I told them, I was not going to be telling anybody. They could take all their crazy ideas and run with them if they wanted.

I expected them to protest, but Toothless just nodded, locking eyes with me. His gaze was steady, unflinching, intense. So much more so than when I usually looked at him.

"Oh, butâ€|" Ruffnut started to protest, but Toothless spoke over her.

"Hiccup doesn't have to talk if he doesn't want to."

"Right." Ruffnut fell silent, and I got the sense this was a struggle for her. But wait, if they weren't making me talkâ€|what did they gain from this? An 'I pitied the freak' badge?

"But," Toothless added, "but if you do want to talk about it, Hiccup, we're here for you."

Now I didn't even know what to think. I frowned at him, struggling to locate anything in his gaze. There was no pity. There was no sadness, no worry, none of the emotions reflected in Astrid's blue eyes, or Ruffnut's tear-filled gray ones. No, the only emotion Toothless displayed was, oddly enough, understanding.

And maybe this is weird, especially considering we were two guys and I hardly knew him, but at that moment, I really wanted to hug him, because he felt suddenly like a safe harbor in a stormy sea, a life raft when I'd given up on life. I clung to the feeling, even if I couldn't cling to him. "Thank you." Just speaking was a struggle. "Thank you, Toothless."

His smile was tired, and there were deep circles under his eyes from little sleep. "I'm really glad you're okay, Hiccup."

I felt the sincerity in his words, down to my very bones, but something in me resisted believing in them. It could be a trap, but he could really mean itâ€|I just couldn't decide, and I wasn't sure I wanted to, anyway.

And I didn't know what to say to him, because until this very moment, I hadn't been glad that I was okay. I'd spent the last few days just bemoaning the fact that I was even still alive, but this, sitting here beside these people made me feel briefly grateful for the fact that I'd survived. I was sure that they would walk out of my world soon, leave it to shatter around me. But Toothless hadn't, not yet, and that was all that mattered to me in that moment.

42. Unknown Standard

****Chapter 42: Unknown Standards****

****A/N:** This is dedicated to Manu the Guest, wishing them a very happy birthday! :D *straps on party hat* I think I might be a little late, depending on conflicting timezones but eh. It's February fifth somewhere, okay? That's all we need to know. Anyway, I hope you have a wonderful birthday and have some cake *hands you a slice of birthday cake* **

*****Hands everybody else a slice of birthday cake as well*** I hope the rest of you enjoy this newest update, too - to be honest, it's not my best work, but I think it's okay. I think it's good enough, so it'll suffice. It may be slightly rushed, for I was eager to get it out in time for Manu's birthday and all. Oh, and if anybody has a birthday in February and wants to see a chapter from me, just give me the date and the story! Unless it's like tomorrow or something and you want another update on this in which case you're gonna have to give me a couple days. But my friend sent me this glorious HTTYD2 2015

calendar, so to be POSITIVE I don't forget any of you guys' birthdays, I'll even write them down on that xD Anyway, enjoy this newest chapter!**

P.S: Also look at ussss sixty thousand words and almost 1,200 reviews please make it happennnn pleaseeee I'm so excitedd

* * *

><p>Anxiety was the first thing I registered when I turned Toothless' words over in my mind. Something about what he'd said had really scared me, but I couldn't figure out what it was. "I'm really glad you're okay, Hiccup."

Such sincerity. Such feeling. Too much.

I realized he was still waiting for a response, but I couldn't think of anything to say to him. But just as I thought of that, my eyes drifted instead to Astrid, who I realized only now had been the only one in the room to remain silent this whole time. Not bombarding me with questions or hugging me like Ruffnut; not giving me steady and intense looks, or saying puzzling things that scared me for some reason, like Toothless; she just sat there, listening to the rest of us talk.

I dropped my eyes to my hospital blanket again, prodding my own feelings, trying to figure out if I was ready to talk about it or not. No, I decided, my eyes flicking up to meet Astrid's again. No, I wasn't.

Astrid's eyes were making me almost as uncomfortable as Toothless' words. She reminded me of Ms. Lydia, her gaze so focused and intent, like she was trying to find where I fit in the puzzle, same as the social worker. Come to think of it, that's what Astrid looked like whenever she looked at me. Maybe, all along, she had been the only one to notice that I didn't belong, didn't fit in as well as the other kids. Maybe she'd sensed my inability to blend with more clarity than I ever could have realized.

"Alright." Astrid at last broke her silence, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. If she was talking, she had less time for thinking, meaning she wouldn't be trying so hard to figure me out anymore. "Hiccup, I get it if you don't want to talk about it â€" I do â€" but can't you at least tell us something? I mean, you've been in the hospital, asleep for the past week, and you mixed a ton of different medications to get this way. According to what we heard." She crossed her arms as she finished speaking.

"What else did you hear?" I don't suppose it really mattered, but I was honestly curious. How many people had heard about what happened? And what were they saying about it? Did they understand my intentions? Had I made them clear enough, mixing all those pills, knowing exactly what they would do to me, what they were meant to do to me? Or were they brushing it off, as easily as I'd been brushed off these past few years. Some stupid high school kid just going a little too far in trying to get high.

The idea that a different version to the story was circulating, especially that version, made my blood boil, a flush of anger coming to my face. I'd been living in lies for so long â€" all I'd wanted

was to die in truth.

Astrid frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"What are they saying I did? Do they think I was trying to get high, or what?"

"Hiccup, it wasâ€¦ pretty obvious what you were trying to do." She leaned forward a little in her seat, picking at the hem of her loose white shirt. "I think anybody would have to be an idiot to believe you did that for kicks."

"Oh." I couldn't decide if I was relieved to hear this or not; I certainly didn't want people disbelieving my real reason, thinking I was just like my dad, but at the same time, I wasn't exactly thrilled that people knew I'd tried to kill myself, either.

"Can Iâ€¦" Astrid bit her lip, and I saw Toothless, out of the corner of my eye, straightening up and looking at her very carefully. "Can I ask youâ€¦ why you did it?" Her words came out slowly, like they left her mouth reluctantly, but they left her mouth all the same.

"Astrid." Toothless' voice was firm, not discouraging or encouraging, simply an impassive brick wall I could hide behind, if need be. Again, there was a small jolt of fear at this realization, a jolt of anxiety, but I couldn't figure out why his words were so worrisome to me.

"No." The word shot a tiny thrill through me. It had been so long since I'd possessed this ability, this pleasure, the simple act of saying no, of denying someone else entry. Telling them that they couldn't do what they pleased to me anymore, throw me around like a rag doll or beat me because they were too drunk to thinkâ€¦ I shut those thoughts off as quickly as they'd started, knowing if I let anger color my thoughts and view, I would end up lashing out, boiling over. And I'd done enough boiling over this week to last me a lifetime.

Astrid's eyes fell back to her lap, but it wasn't enough to make me feel guilty; if anything, it strengthened my decision. I did not want to tell her anything; I didn't even want to talk about what had happened, what I'd tried to do, what I'd so nearly done. But before I'd found the strength to say no, Toothless had tried to intervene. That still bothered me a bit, but I didn't figure out why until he lifted his eyes to mine, just a nod in my direction. He didn't say anything, he just nodded at me. But with the simple gesture came understanding. I thought I understood now why I was so afraid of his words, his eyes, his intense gazes and kind interventions.

"You're right," Astrid's voice was very quiet, jerking me out of my thoughts. If I didn't know the girl before me better, I would have sworn that something in her words sounded ashamed. "I'm sorry. It was an insensitive question."

"It's okay." Even if it wasn't, I didn't care. I may not have felt guilty, but I certainly wasn't going to make Astrid feel any worse, either. I cut my gaze back to Toothless again, remembering my reasons for being so afraid.

Though it had been Astrid to see right through me, and Ruffnut was the first to call me her friend, it was Toothless who I didn't understand, Toothless the only one I couldn't please. Because everyone else, see, I knew what their standard of perfection was. But Toothless didn't seem to have one, and that terrified me more than I could ever admit.

How could you please someone you didn't even know?

"We'd better go." Ruffnut finally broke the long, slightly awkward silence, standing up from her chair and tugging lightly on Astrid's arm. "That woman back there in the waiting room wants to see you, too."

"Whatâ€¦what woman?" I asked uncertainly, my brow wrinkling, fear entering my heart. Ms. Lydia? Again? No, she'd gotten everything she needed from me, she wasn't taking me away from my dad after everythingâ€¦

"I don't know," Ruffnut shrugged, unconcerned, but she must have spotted my stricken expression, because she furrowed her brow, trying to remember. "I think she might be a teacher in our school. Art, maybe? She's got a purple feather in her hair, that's all I know." She shrugged it off before closing in for a second hug, one I did not particularly want. Unfortunately, my newfound ability to say no did not stretch to things like this, it seemed, because she hugged me anyway. I didn't hug her back this time.

Astrid didn't hug me, but she fussed with her bag a little too much on her way out the door. She and Ruffnut lingered in the doorway, waiting for Toothless to leave. He didn't hug me either, but he didn't leave silently like Astrid. "Hey, we're coming back tomorrow, okay?"

I wondered why he felt the need to reassure me of that. Did I look sad that he was leaving?

"We'll be back." He edged a little closer to the door, hooking one finger around the edge, preventing it from closing fully. "We'll always come back." He slid out of the room, the door closing, with one final 'click' behind him.

"_We'll always come back." _

And, out of everything about Toothless, the things I did understand and the things I didn't, this was the one that terrified me most of all.

43. Simmer and Boil

****Chapter 43: Simmer and Boil ****

****A/N: HAPPY BIRTHDAY TOOOOOO *drum roll* mypettaylor1, Anno the Guest aandddd frostydragonlover! Did I get everyone, did I get everyone? Going once, going twice...I think I did! Woo-hoo! :D To my pettaylor1, I'm sorry it's belated *is ashamed* I meant to get it up earlier, but life got so crazy! D: I seriously had no idea when I would ever find the inspiration for this chap again, but I did. To Anno the Guest, bro, take pride in your birthday! You know Hiccup was**

born on a leap year, too, right? Well, it says so in the books, it's just never mentioned in the movies. Tofrostydragonlover, have a great birthday! You rock! To all three of you, thank you for your reviews and for allowing me to write a birthday chapter for you guys. I intended to write separate chapters, but then I realized how close together you guys' birthdays actually were, and I didn't think you'd mind...well, if any of you do, shoot me a PM or leave a review and I'll fix things by giving you your own chapter, alright? Now, where were we? **

**Oh, yeah, you guys - the rest of the readers included - are awesome! Thanks for being so amazing! Please leave a few reviews on your way out! And Hiccup is so fun to write in this fic just yes xD xD Anyway, bye! :D **

* * *

><p>I thought I was prepared when Ms. Delaney walked into the room. I knew what I was going to do. I would avoid all her questions, and avoid her eyes. But seeing her standing there, the purple feather springing erratically up out of her brown hair jogged something in my memory, and suddenly words were tumbling out of my mouth, faster than I could stop them. "It was you."<p>

"What?" She took the seat beside my bed, the one Astrid had vacated, and set her gigantic purple plaid purse " which was more like a suitcase than a purse " on the other seat, a concerned frown on her face.

I hesitated for a fraction of a second " had she not been the one there? No, she had to be. Nobody else would have done this, would have calmed me or cared for me the way she had. I swallowed, forcing myself to speak again. "It was you. You were there, and you kept trying to soothe me, and you kept smoothing my hair and telling me everything was going to be okay"

She interrupted me before I could finish, shaking her head, making her long hair swing. "I'm sorry, Hiccup, that wasn't me."

"It wasn't?" But it had to be; she was the only person who had ever expressed any hint that she could care that deeply.

"I wasn't the one who took you here, Hiccup, I didn't even know."

"You didn't?" This was all new to me. "Then" then how did I wind up here?" For the first time, I had no theories about how I had wound up at the hospital. I'd contented myself with them, believing that once the social worker came back, I could ask her how I'd come to be there, but I'd assumed that it had to have something to do with Ms. Delaney. I remembered seeing her standing over me, thinking it was my mother, and then crying when I realized it wasn't. It had to have been her. She was the only person in the world who reminded me so strongly of my mother

"They said your father brought you in here"

"What?" I suddenly didn't care about interrupting her, I suddenly didn't care that she hadn't been there. Why had my dad brought me in here? Why had he called an ambulance? He should have thrown a party

when he saw me lying there on the floor, not called an ambulance! I was supposed to die, and he had destroyed that for me!

Ms. Delaney appeared surprised by my reaction. "I thought you knewâ€|"

"No, no, no, he shouldn't have brought me in here, I mean, he had to have knownâ€|" My voice trailed off, but my thoughts didn't. Dad had brought me here, if Ms. Delaney was to be believed. Brought me here despite the fact that I'd been doing him a favor by dying, brought me here despite the fact that he knew somebody would ask about the bruises. He must have known, must have remembered that last beating. I ran my fingers through my hair, probably messing it up and making it look even worse than it did already, but at that moment, I didn't care. "Where is he?" Was he in prison? No, no, he couldn't have been, the social worker had been asking me too many questionsâ€|

A sudden sick feeling came into my stomach, and I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. _What if he had turned himself in? _

If he had, then it would be my fault, completely my fault. If I hadn'tâ€|if I had been better, he would never have started hitting me in the first place, and he wouldn't be in this mess right now. I had been trying to make things better for him, and I thought his life would improve if only I wasn't in it. Now I saw that the death I had tried so hard to make painless for the both of us had only made things worse. Would I never learn how to do things right?

"Hiccup? Hiccup, are you alright?" Ms. Delaney pulled me back to reality, pulled me back out of the past, laying her hand on my shoulder. "Are you alright, Hiccup?"

"Where is he, Ms. Delaney?" I blurted, my lips shaking as I tried to form the words. "Ms. Delaney, please tell me he's alrightâ€|"

She bit her lip, clearly thinking of what to tell me. I knew that look. I wore it all the time, whenever I was trying to decide whether to lie or tell the truth. I bet you can guess which answer I always went with, but with Ms. Delaney, it seemed to be more of a moral thing than what was most believable. She used her other hand to start smoothing my hair, her touch so gentle that I feared it would break me. "To tell the truth," she finally admitted heavily, "we don't actually know."

My heart skipped a beat. "We?" I repeated cautiously, feeling anxiety beginning to twist my heart into a knot. _Please let him be okay, pleaseâ€|it's all my fault if he's notâ€| I'll be a better son, just so long as he's okayâ€|I'll never do anything to make him mad, and I'll never eat again, I'll starve myself if I have toâ€| _

"He's completely disappeared, according to the doctors. They asked him to stay behind in the waiting room for a few minutes, possibly an hour or so, but they assured him they would let him back there again as soon as they could. When they came back to inform him of the improvement in your condition, he wasn't there."

I gave a groan as she finished her story, running my fingers through my hair. She stopped smoothing down the wild auburn strands, obviously realizing that comfort was not what I needed right then. I would never, ever complain about getting hit again, I would never

complain about being a mistake if he was okayâ€¦I just needed to find himâ€¦

"But it's okay, Hiccup, they're still looking," she continued in a stronger voice. "And you're not in any danger, because he's never touching you again."

At these words, my heart didn't just skip a beat â€" it stopped altogether. "What...no! I don't wantâ€¦I mean, I don't needâ€¦that's not it at all! Ms. Delaney, I'm notâ€¦he's notâ€¦he's a goodâ€¦" I hesitated, then faltered, so caught up in lies that I wasn't sure where they ended and the truth began. "I want to see him again," I finally managed, trying to sound as confident as I could. "Whenever you find him, I want to see him again."

Ms. Delaney's eyes softened. "Hiccup, I may not be a law enforcement officer, but I can already tell you that that's not an option."

"But he hasn't done anything wrong!" My voice grew higher and higher as my distress became worse and worse. "You don't understand, Ms. Delaney, this isâ€¦this is all my faultâ€¦" I sighed, lowering my eyes to the hospital blanket. "It's my fault I'm here in the first place, it's my fault this all happenedâ€¦"

"Hiccup, I'm not talking about you being here. I think you know what I am talking about, though."

"But that's my fault, too!" I said urgently. I had to give up the facade of a happy kid in a normal home â€" she knew already, and there was no keeping it from her. "Ms. Delaney, you don't understand, but everything that's been going wrong, that stuff, it's all my fault, and you can't punish my dad for what I did!"

She looked at me incredulously for a long second before shaking her head in disbelief. "This is what you meant then, isn't it?"

I looked at her in confusion, struggling to remember what I'd ever said that hinted at what went on in my home. I could think of a million ways I'd screwed up, and she hadn't seen then, hadn't even suspectedâ€¦

"I asked you if things had worked out at home," she hastened to explain. "You said they had. Is this what you meant, then? You meant everything had worked out because you were going to try and kill yourself?"

I could feel the defensiveness flaring up as I spoke. "And it's all my fault I didn't, see! Don't blame my dad for my mistakes!"

"Hiccup, nothing in this situation is your fault." Her voice sounded harder than I remembered it. Suddenly, she didn't sound like my mother and I looked away from her so I didn't have to think about her. "If anything, it's good that your father got you to the hospital in time â€" he saved a life."

"He saved a mistake." My voice was quiet, but just as hard as hers now. I could be hard and cold too, just like her. "I wasn't worth saving. That's the only part of this that's his fault, was his decision to save me. I wish he hadn't done it at

all."

"Hiccupâ€"

"I thought he would be happy when I was dead. He hated me so much when I was aliveâ€|" I trailed off, rubbing at my eyes, desperate to banish the budding tears. "I thought his life would change, improve when I was dead. But I just made everything worse againâ€|"

"Hiccup, nothing would be improved if you were dead." And now she was being unfair, because she was being gentle again and I needed her to be hard and cold and mean, so I could get angry with her without feeling guilty. She gave my hand a squeeze, but I didn't want her comfort â€" I only wanted her anger, so I could give her some of mine. "The world would have lost another beautiful person, and people would have grieved andâ€"

"I'm not beautiful!" I yanked my hand out of her grip. My voice was much louder than I was used to, filled with rage. I needed to calm down, keep it in, but I couldn't quite connect what I needed to do with what I was actually doing. I was watching myself as it happened, as it boiled over. "Nobody would have grieved, Ms. Delaney, nobody would have missed the mistake!"

"You're not a mistake." Why couldn't she just be angry with me, as I was with her? I just needed her to be angry, because I needed to be angry, too. "Hiccup, you're not a mistake. It wasn't your fault."

No. Damn it, no, I wasn't going to cry again. I wasn't going to cry. I was going to be angry, going to be furious because she was trying to tell me beautiful lies. I wanted to be angry. "I screwed it up, Ms. Delaney, I screwed up everything! If I had just died, as I should have, none of this would have happened! I wanted to make things better!"

"Hiccupâ€"

"I wanted to make things better, I wanted to die. If I was dead, things would be better." I wasn't crying bitter tears of hurt or pain anymore â€" I was far too angry for that. If my vision was blurred, it was from all the fury I felt right then, building up in me, unstoppable and uncontainable. She had been right. I had been so angry all along, and I had never even realized it before now. "If I was deadâ€|" Sobs threatened to steal my words away, but I refused to let them. I had cried too much, and I needed to say this, needed to yell it out if I had to. I needed this, needed this anger to keep me going. "If I was dead, I know I'd like myself a lot better. And I'm pretty sure everyone else would, too."

I thought I'd boiled over when I'd tried to die, and I'd thought I'd boiled over when I'd cried in her class, but now I saw that I'd just been simmering. Now, here was the boil, rushing out of me in waves, twisting me into something unrecognizable. "Everything would be better, Ms. Delaney, if only I could disappear."

**A/N: That title is so common xD but meh I figured it worked with the subject matter of this chapter xD especially that first part. Anyway, I got most of this written last night but I was hesitant to post it, and I'm glad I didn't! I found errors like you would not believe xP And there were lines I needed to add that I'd forgotten last night. This story feels odd, you know. It feels weird because it's like even though it's Hiccup's POV and he shares everything with the reader, I feel like he knows things that he doesn't, really, and I have to remind myself that while I know everything about this AU, the people reading it don't. It's sometimes hard for me to slow down and remind myself that not everyone knows everything I do. (Although the people who read the first version are probably more knowledgeable than the people who have just read this one.) Anyway. Ramblessssss. Oh, also, Jack, my plant? He died. He went brown and hung down and now he has mysteriously disappeared from the house, so I think either somebody else took pity and put him out of his misery or the mold he was growing just grew legs and ran from me and my attempts to give him life. I'm terrible with plants. I've killed every plant I ever owned. Except I had a tomato plant once whose death was NOT MY FAULT because somebody else watered him with chlorinated water -- So that really wasn't my fault. But then I had a basil plant that died after only a week spent under my care, andddd then I had this plant. Jack. So yep that's my history with herbs. **

* * *

><p>There was silence for a second until she grabbed my hand. "*No*". Hiccup, no." Her eyes blazed with anger, and for a second I wondered if she was going to smack me. She certainly looked angry enough, so I tensed and waited for the blow, but nothing came. So I shoved her hand away and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I don't want to talk anymore." And I didn't. Rage licked my insides, and it was nearly impossible to keep my voice even when I spoke. I just knew if she stayed any longer, and tried to make me talk any more, I would blow up at her. And I didn't want that. She may have spent the last twenty minutes denying everything I said and turning my life completely upside down, but I didn't know what would happen if I yelled at her. Would I say something I could never take back? And she would hit me for speaking that way to her. I had to save whatever terrible opinion she had of me now, before it got any worse.

Ms. Delaney sighed, and her shoulders slumped. The anger faded abruptly from her eyes, and she just looked tired and sad. I had done that to her. No matter which way I turned, I was doing something wrong, I was hurting someone. "You're not a mistake, Hiccup. You're not."

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Hiccup." She placed her hand on my shoulder now instead, but I still couldn't look at her.

"I said I didn't want to talk anymore."

"Fine." Something in her face hardened. "Then I'll talk this time, and you can listen."

I pulled away from her. "I'm always listening to you!" No, this wasn't right. I needed to shut up because things were getting out of hand. I needed to stop before I said something I'd regret. And then a new thought occurred to me, one I previously hadn't even considered. "And how did you know about my dad?"

"That's not a fair accusation," she countered, picking up her purse and rifling through it madly, shuffling random things around. I saw a few long outdated receipts escape the confines of the bag, only to immediately flutter to the floor. She didn't pick them up again.

"It's notâ€¦" I shook myself. "I'm not accusing you of anything. You'reâ€¦you're jumping to conclusions. And seriously, how did you know about my dad?"

"Hiccup." She repeated my name, thrusting her purse back in the chair, papers falling out of it. As if suddenly remembering a mission of utmost importance, she quickly snatched it back up by the strap again, now checking the front pockets. "You're upset, and I understand that, but I won't have you taking it out on me." Her voice was firm, but not mean. I wasn't sure if this was a good sign or not.

"I'm not taking anything out on you," I muttered, but I didn't talk anymore, just in case I proved her point. Only then, the only sound in the room was the incessant crinkling of papers in her bag, and I couldn't take it anymore. "And I want to know how you knew everything you did about Dad!"

"I've got the answer to that," she told me, and when I looked up at her, she was clutching a crumpled paper in her fist.

I made a grab for it, but she held it away from me, unfolding it and smoothing out the wrinkles and creases before handing it over to me, and setting it on the hospital blanket. It fluttered in a sudden gust of air from one of the ceiling vents, and it looked dirty, like something had happened to it since I'd last seen it, but I still recognized it. My drawing for the art competition.

"And now I have a question to ask you."

I lifted my gaze to hers. I couldn't look at the drawing anymore. There was too much pain in the pencil lines, pain I'd thought I was free of. Broken bottles and Xs and my dad leaning scarily close and telling me that under no circumstances was I ever to tell him I loved him again. I closed my suddenly tired and tear-filled eyes, unsure if I could answer this question.

"Don't ignore me."

"Alright." I slowly opened my eyes. "Alright, what do you want?"

"Did youâ€¦did you want somebody to know?" Her long brown hair fell over one shoulder as she slowly cocked her head, her eyes intense and serious. "Did youâ€¦I don't know, did you want to tell somebody, or let them knowâ€¦is that why you did that?"

I looked back down at the drawing, at the shaded area indicating the

bruise on my face. I ran a hand through my hair, rumpling it even more. How was I supposed to answer that? "I don't know." I had made it obvious from the drawing what was going on. "Maybe. Yes? No? I wantedâ€¦I don't know what I wanted. I wanted them to knowâ€¦I wanted them to knowâ€¦" I looked back down at the paper, at the second part to the drawing, of a bone-thin boy turning his back on the plate of food, facing the wall of Xs. "I wanted them to know I was hurting, but not like this. I didn't want them knowing like this." I gestured to myself. Who would want people to know they were hurting only because they had failed at killing themselves? I wished my dad had never brought me here. I needed to know why. I needed to see him again. "Maybe it was a shitty way to let them know. But the other kids suspectedâ€¦some of them did." My mind flitted to Astrid.

"Those kids in the waiting room?" Ms. Delaney guessed, with not a bit of surprise. "The Thorston girl â€" Ruffnut, I think? â€" she seemed quite shell-shocked, and you couldn't have calmed Caden down for anything." She pushed her hair back behind her ears.

"Caden?" I repeated, brows drawing down.

She paused in the middle of her task, one hand straying back to her purse again. "Yesâ€¦you do know Caden, don't you?"

"I don't know any Caden." I shook my head.

"He went into this room with you. Dark skin, black hairâ€¦wears a lot of hoodies?"

"Waitâ€¦_Toothless_?" My brain jammed to a sudden halt when I came to the only possible conclusion. I had been stupid to assume that Toothless was his real name, but the thought to ask had never crossed my mind.

Ms. Delaney shook her head, a sad smile crossing her face. "Is he still going by that old nickname, then? I should have known, really. He was always stubborn."

"Youâ€¦you _know_ Toothless?"

"His name isâ€¦oh, forget it," she sighed wearily before shaking her head. "Obviously, you know him as Toothless, and that won't be discouraged easily."

"How do you know him?"

"I hardly thinkâ€¦this isn't a necessary conversation at the present moment," she replied evasively.

"Why d'you call him Caden?"

"That's his _name_."

"Why does he go by Toothless?"

"Because he's the stubborn boy who never slowed down, no matter how much other people told him to." She sighed, falling farther back in her chair before abruptly straightening, tucking her hair behind her ears again. "I need to leave. I'm sure you're tired."

"I'm not," I protested, putting a hand on her arm as she tried to rise. "Please, Ms. Delaney, this is the first I'm hearing about anything andamp;"

"And it's his business. I shouldn't have said a word." She shook my arm off her and was out the door with her big plaid purse slung on her shoulder before I could say another word.

* * *

><p>After Ms. Delaney left, there wasn't much to be done. Mostly, I just lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, my mind whirling. I had so many questions and nobody to ask, nobody willing to give me answers. I desperately wanted to know more about my dad, of course, and then there was all that stuff Ms. Delaney had talked about with Toothless, and I just couldn't get that out of my head. Why did he go by Toothless when his real name was Caden?<p>

I knew I would be alone tonight, with nothing but questions. And the drawing. Ms. Delaney had forgotten to take back the drawing. I didn't want to look at it anymore, because she was right. I had drawn it because I wanted people to know. I just didn't want to tell them.

"Hiccup?" The blonde nurse again. I was almost beginning to get used to her and her constant cheerfulness. I propped myself on one elbow and rolled over onto my side, trying to smile at her.

"Yes?"

"You have a visitor."

"What?" I glanced automatically at the clock at my bedside, ticking away each second of my life that I wasted here with all my endless questions. It had been hours since Ms. Delaney had been. "This late?"

"She's been running herself ragged, the way she looks."

"She?" I repeated, mystified. Exactly how many women did I know, at this point? I was pretty much out of people.

"Do you want me to let her in?"

"Uhamp;" Curiosity outweighed caution, and I shrugged. "Sure. Send her in."

The next second, Heather had flown into the room, her normally neat dark braid a sloppy mess, her green eyes sparkling with what might have been tears. "Hiccup! Hicamp;"Hiccup. Ohamp;"Hiccup." She sighed my name one last time, immediately collapsing in the plastic chair beside the bed, her chest heaving with rapid breaths. "I was so worried, and I was scared I wouldn't make it here in time before visiting hours were over."

I couldn't think of anything to say back. What was she even doing here? Okay, so maybe Astrid and Ruffnut and Toothless and Ms. Delaney all had an excuse. Toothless amp;" Caden, apparently amp;" and the girls pitied me, while Ms. Delaney wanted the truth about my drawing. But

Heather? She'd left her number on my napkin once, and then I'd told her I'd walked into a door. I couldn't believe she was here, after all of two interactions.

I cleared my throat, searching for something to say. "You nearly didn't." I gestured to the ticking clock beside the bed.

She nodded, a strand of thick hair falling out of the braid and into her eyes. She quickly brushed it back. "I was so worried." Her eyes softened, but she didn't ask questions. She just kept drinking in the sight of me, and frankly this was starting to freak me out.

"I thought about calling you," I finally blurted, just for something to say.

"What?" Her brows drew down in confusion.

"Yourâ€|your number." I blushed as I remembered it. "I had it. Before Iâ€|before I took the pillsâ€|" I looked away. "I thought about calling you. Just to talk."

Her expression was pained, but she still asked the question anyway. "What stopped you?"

I shook my head, the truth tumbling out, whether I wanted it to or not. "It was a stupid thought. I never had any plans to act on it. Besides, you were at work, I figured."

She never batted an eye. "Work is no excuse. You should have called me."

"Will someone please explain what's so wrong?" I demanded angrily, my temper getting the better of me. "Everyone's acting like it's some huge deal when it's not! Why are they acting like this?"

She frowned at me. "You scared us."

"Scared who?" I folded my arms. "Not my dad. Not anyone from school."

"You scared me."

"Why?" I uncrossed my arms, momentarily too surprised to think of a good comeback. "You don't know me."

She opened her mouth to protest, then slowly closed it again. "No." She shook her head, another strand of hair coming loose. "No, I don't. But I know enough."

45. Live

****Chapter 45: Live****

****A/N: Happy birthday to OrigamiStar and Fuchsia Phantom! Their birthdays happened to fall one day apart, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone, and post one chapter instead of the usual two. I hope the two aforementioned readers enjoy the chapter, and I hope everyone else does, too! Also, I bring good news! I'm getting...A Jack Frost the second! Yes, I'm trying again with the same type of**

plant. Only, maybe I should name it Bunny this time, and keep naming plants after the Guardians xD Because I'm sure they're all going to die. Anyway, what I really want is a garden, especially since summer is coming, but I couldn't even Jack alive, so I don't think a garden is the best route for me at the current moment. Also, I put on some coffee today, but I was running on autopilot, so even though I only put in enough for four cups, I put in so many grounds that it tastes like I'm licking a coffee bean XD It's so strong, seriously. But I love it :3 **

* * *

><p>I wasn't sure how to respond.<p>

The truth was, she was wrong. She didn't know enough. How much could she possibly know about me, after all? A scribbled number on a napkin and a free milkshake was not enough foundation for a friendship. Besides that, I was sure she would see how much of a mistake I was any day now. The real me wasn't buried so deep, after all. The surface, these walls I hid behind, were so paper-thin, and I was sure she could crumple them easily. She would see the real me soon, and regret everything she'd ever done for me. Thoughts like this weren't easy, but I knew they were the truth. She needed to be out of my life. She shouldn't even be in this hospital room. She shouldn't be here at all. I deserved to be alone, with nothing but my Xs. Just me and my Xs. That was the way it should be.

"What do you know?" This appeared the safest route for me to go at the current moment; I could avoid the fact that she'd just said she knew enough to rush to the hospital at eight o' clock at night, but I did need to know how she knew some things.

"If you're asking whether I know why you were admitted to the hospitalâ€| she took a deep breath, her braid falling freely now from its band, an ebony waterfall spilling down her back. She leaned forward a little as she spoke. "Yes. I know why you're here. I know more than you think."

There it was again â€" her claims of knowing. I wondered if she knew about my father. I wondered if she knew who had brought me here, that he was currently being hunted like some sort of animal. I wanted to know, but I was too ashamed to ask.

"You do?" I decided instead.

"People talk."

_Of course. _

"I want to know things, of course," she continued. "I have questions, obviously, but if you don't want to talk, I won't make you."

It felt like I'd been answering a lot of questions lately. First the doctors, then the social workers, then the kids, and Ms. Delaneyâ€|I sighed. "No, I don't," I admitted. "You can try again tomorrow, maybe, when I'm in a better frame of mind."

She laughed then, but it sounded sad. "I doubt tomorrow will put you in a better frame of mind."

"No. I guess not. If I'm still thinking tonight about how many better ways I could have done it, then I guessâ€œ"

"Hiccup." And for the first time since entering the room, Heather's fear didn't sound like it was fear for me. I shifted my gaze to look at her, surprised to find her leaning back in her chair, leaning away.

"I just thought it would be better," I told her, reaching up to push my hair back out of my eyes. "I mean, I thought pills would beâ€œgood. You know? Quieter. I didn't want to use a gun and I didn't want to jump off a building. That'd beâ€œbloody. And it'd draw attention. I wanted to use something that wouldn't draw a lot of attention."

"Hiccupâ€œ" her hand found my shoulder, but it would take more than that to stop me now.

"I didn't want to leave a mess for my dad to clean up." I knew I should stop. Heather didn't want to hear this. I shouldn't be still talking about it, but I couldn't make myself stop. Somehow, I found relief in telling her. "I've already been enough of a burden on him, I meanâ€œwith everything he's going through nowâ€œhe should never have brought me here." I drew my knees up to my chest, hugging them.

"Stop it," Heather said sharply.

I looked around and realized her hand had disappeared from my shoulder.

"Stop talking like that," she added, her brows drawing down to form a scowl now. "Hiccup, do you have any idea whatâ€œwhat you're doing to me? I was scared! I charged in here after hearing about that kid on Dragon Whisperer's Way who'd tried to kill himself, I charged over here after worrying for hours! I had no idea what had happened, all I knew was that you were in the hospital after trying to kill yourself, I come in here, and you're still talking about it?"

I had more anger. I could have boiled over right then, I could have lashed out, but I held it back and reigned it in because I didn't have the energy to be angry any longer. What was the point? I needed to cool down. "Okay." I held my hands up in surrender. "I won't talk about it anymore."

"You're still thinking about it. Hiccupâ€œ" she took my extended hand in hers, bringing it close to her face, intertwining our fingers. She stared at our interlocked fingers and I could see her pretty mouth moving, forming soundless words. Finally, she lifted her gaze and gave me a kind of intense, steady look that almost scared me. "Do you really want to die?"

I thought about it. I didn't want to tell her the truth, partly because she sounded so disbelieving. It was as if she couldn't imagine why anyone would ever want to die. Lying would be so easy. I'd done it a million times. And yet, even as I inhaled with the intention of deceit, I let it out again in a little sigh, unable to bring myself to do it. Finally, I just decided on the truth. "I'd miss you."

She sank back in her chair, releasing my hand and looking down at her lap, giving little gasps like she was about to cry. My palms tingled from the glow of her touch and I craved the warmth of her fingers.

"You really mean that?" Her voice was thick with tears and guilt made it hard to swallow. I had done that to her. I had made her cry. I was making everyone cry these days.

I nodded.

Her gasp let me know that that was the wrong answer. When she spoke, her voice sounded small. "I mean, you really want to die?"

"You already asked me this question," I reminded her. "I gave you my answer."

She ignored that. "There's really nothing left for you to live for? Nothing?"

"What's the point?" And really, what was? If I had to live life like this for the next ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years, then really, what was the point of living at all? I would spend the next few trying to avoid my dad and his fists, struggling to keep him calm and happy, thinking of how much food I didn't deserve but desperately wanted, knowing I should quit eating and let myself die. I'd spend the next few years with my head ducked down, never making eye contact, never eating, barely sleeping, doing nothing but homework and thinking up clever lies for why I had a bruise that day, if anyone cared enough to ask about it at all. I would go through my life hiding my face, blushing when people looked at me and never really being heard, never being seen, because I was this invisible overachiever who never really mattered at all, and if I had just died everyone would be glad I was gone. I thought I was going to burst into tears then, but I didn't. Somehow, I managed to swallow them back, because Heather was crying right then, and I didn't need to add anything else to her burden right now.

"The point?" Her voice interrupted my musings, and I turned to look at her, realizing she was answering my last words. "The point is—we well, silly things, Hiccup. We live for silly things. We live for things like—I mean, really, we live for big things. We live for friendship, and family, and we live for love. We live for our little brothers and sisters, but we live for ourselves, too. We live for things like, like, chocolate and balloons and birthdays. We live for things like summer, and stargazing and ice cream and we live because there's so much we still want to do. We live because our lives aren't over, because we're here. We live because we're here."

I blinked. "I don't have that." I sounded scared when I spoke. I would never know what she meant. I would never get to experience the pure joy of being alive, because when I had been lucky enough to have a life at all, I had never stopped or slowed down to appreciate it until it was ripped away from me and I was left drowning in bruises and darkness and Xs, constantly searching for the light.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have that—" I looked away from her, trying to get a grip on my emotions. Tears kept springing into my eyes. "The only piece of

family I have would like me better dead. And I don't have any friends, I'm not living for love, I'm not living for me. There's nothing I want to do. There's nothing anyone can say that could convince me that I still have something to live for."

"Nothing? You call those kids in the shop nothing?" When my brow wrinkled, she elaborated. "Those kids who came with you to Sweet Tooth?"

"Oh." My brow cleared. "Toothless, Astrid and Ruffnut," I informed her.

"See? You do still have a lot to live for. Even if you don't see it."

46. Fallen So Far

****Chapter 46: Fallen So Far****

****A/N:** Happy birthday to PandaChristiniaTFR! I hope you had a great one! This wasn't a direct request, but the aforementioned user left a review telling me their birthday and how much they enjoy this story, so, I hope they like this chapter! It's depressing, though. Sorry about that -- I intended it to be happier, but there we go, these things are never predictable and sometimes nonnegotiable. Oh, also, guess what? I got sunflower seeds. I planted them like six days ago, on the first of June, and they haven't sprouted yet. I think I killed them before they were even born. If they do sprout and grow, though, I'm gonna name them Rapunzel, because they're golden flowers and they're called sunflowers and her mother only survived because of a golden flower and she represents the sun, in the story. Anyway. Also, serious question here: do you guys think I could make it as a writer? Sometimes I think I could. Sometimes I see it as a career path and one I'd enjoy a lot. And then other times I'm just like no. I could never do that. Do you think I could or couldn't? I need honesty.

* * *

><p>I didn't get a chance to respond before the blonde nurse poked her head in, announcing that visiting hours were over, but I didn't really have a clue what to say, anyway. While Heather gathered up her things, fingers fumbling with the straps of her purse, I simply sat there in silence, mulling over her words. I probably should have said something â€" 'goodbye'. Maybe 'thanks for visiting me, even though we hardly know each other'. That would have been good, right? But I didn't. I couldn't think of anything to say. I was still thinking about her words.<p>

She was turning to leave now, disheveled dark braid swinging behind her as she moved, her body taut, back ramrod straight. I thought she would leave then, but she paused. Turned back to look at me. When she crossed the room again, her footsteps on the hospital floor the only sound, I thought she had merely forgotten something. There was something akin to hesitation in her gaze when she reached out to touch me and as she leaned closer, I thought, for one wild instant, that she was going to kiss me. Her lipstick-covered mouth was so close to mine that we were momentarily sharing breath. But she drew away then, drew away and ran her fingers through my hair. "Hang in

there, Hiccup. Just hang in there."

Secretly, I savored her touch, and thought about her words. I couldn't really stop thinking about them. Visiting hours were over, as the nurse had said, so I was alone for the night, but I was far from sleep. The hours kept on coming, so I kept on thinking. My machines kept beeping and vibrating, the nurses kept checking on me, the night stretched on, every little sound and touch and sensation letting me know I was still alive. _And to what purpose? _

Heather had been right. We did live for silly, small things like birthdays and stargazing and chocolates. She was right about that. I hadn't had any simple pleasures like that for four or five years now, ever since my mom died, ever since that first night that my father had come home drunk. So why had I survived? There was nothing left for me here. I didn't have things the way Heather did " I didn't have things, big or little, that I cared enough for to stay alive. I wasn't like other people, who had mothers and fathers or younger or older siblings, people with a favorite season or a favorite color, people who deserved food and friends and light and happiness. I deserved hunger and solitude and darkness and loneliness. I wasn't like those other people who had things to sustain them, things to live for. They had families. I had_ nothing_.

They had families and I had a father who I wasn't allowed to call daddy, a father who hated me, a father who beat me, a father who would never love me because I didn't deserve it, a father whose love I may never earn. A father who I wasn't allowed to love.

But I had had a family. Once, a long time ago. I had been very young then. But I had had a mother who tucked me in at night and read me stories and sang me lullabies and rocked me to sleep, a mother who smiled often and laughed at all my jokes, a mother who kissed me whenever I needed it. I had had a father who played catch with me and hugged me, a father that I was allowed to love. I had had more than that. I had had a _daddy_.

I had had a life worth living, people I loved, people who loved me back, people whose love I didn't have to earn, people who touched me without the intent to harm me. My daddy, he hugged me and he loved me, but my _father_ "no. His hands choked and punched and slapped and hurt, and they'd never once touched me out of love.

I had had a family once upon a time. Once upon a time, I had had a daddy.

But that was all in the past now, as far away, as surreal as a fairy tale. I couldn't bleed life into storybooks; I couldn't make the characters appear in reality. I couldn't bring my family back together, I couldn't make us whole again. We were irreparably broken, all of us and I "I was the worst one of all, the reason my whole family had fallen apart. The reason everyone else was broken, the reason my father didn't love me the way my daddy had.

And now Heather wanted to talk to me about what made life worth living? I knew better than anyone how amazing life was when people loved you, the joy you derived and the pleasure you found in something as simple as the front door opening, because it meant your daddy was home. I knew better than anyone how it felt, to sit up in bed and look at out at the world, all lit up with sunlight and I knew

how it felt to sigh with contentment and know, with an unshakable certainty, that my life would continue in this fashion for the rest of my years. I'd felt safe. There was a time when I was not suffocating under the crushing weight of all that I am, and I'd spent that time chasing airplanes and building ice castles in the air, holding onto everything because I never, ever dreamed it would be ripped away.

And now was a time of watching airplanes and shattering castles and letting go of everything, for if I didn't, it would just hurt more when it was taken away. There was no use in looking for hope in a hopeless place, searching for joy in a joyless world, looking for the sun when all there was to see was rain.

I knew better than anyone how it felt to be loved and how it felt to be abandoned.

How did I get here, how did I get to this point? How had I fallen so far, from a happy little boy in a happy home with a loving mother, a loving daddy, to a bone-thin kid in a hospital bed, Xs on his wrist and in his notebooks, As on his tests, imperfection and weariness in every line of his face.

How had I fallen so far?

47. Invisible

****Chapter 47: Invisible ****

****A/N:** Chapter 47, peoples! Woot, woot! Happy birthday toooo PhoenixofMyth, whose birthday was last week, and to Andy the Guest's friend, whose birthday is this week. I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. Again. And apparently, I'm answering requests for readers' friends now, too. Wow. In other news, my sunflowers officially died before they were even born. Yes, 'tis a sad day in this household. I definitely do not possess a green thumb. I should just give up on plants. To the people who answered my question in the AN last chapter - thank you guys. Thanks for the feedback. I asked for honesty and boy did you guys deliver. A small note to the people who said I should work on this: I know, I know. My pacing and action are shit. I don't even know what it is, honestly! I just have this thing - To Be Loved the Way You Love Me, my other fanfiction, is a fine example of this - I just feel like I have all these ideas for what's going to happen and I have to write them all and I can't leave a single idea out because they're all going to be super important and fun to write and just gahhhhh. That's my problem with Starlight, Star Bright, too - I made too much happen too fast in some places, and too little happened too slowly in others. Chapters 6-10 come to mind with the former, and chapters 20-22 with the latter. Seriously, my pacing sucks ass. And action is just ughhhh it's like why do I need to write sword fights and fist fights and intense battle scenes when I could just do really emotional dialogueeee. Unfortunately the genre I'm hoping to go into is fantasy. Sooooo yeah. Heh. Um. I need to basically find a genre that suits me better. But I love fantasy! It's my favorite! I mean, the others are okay, but it's just fantasy does things, bro. Fantasy is the best. I love it. ******

* * *

><p>I had a lot of trouble sleeping that night.<p>

I ordinarily had a lot of trouble sleeping, though " when I was younger, like ten, I used to never be able to even close my eyes until I was sure Dad was home safe. I was scared to go to sleep alone, and more than that, I was terrified he would do something stupid or careless while drunk and get himself hurt or killed.

Nowadays I couldn't get to sleep when Dad was in the house " too scared of an unexpected beating, kept awake by the sound of him breaking anything he could find, my own bruised body curled into a tight ball, trying to quiet the sound of my own hunger. I swallowed, staring up at the speckled ceiling. Dad wasn't what kept me awake this time, although he was certainly part of it.

I just couldn't turn stop thinking about everything that had happened today. There was too much to think about. There was Heather, and everything she'd said to me, her insistence that I still had something to live for. There was Ms. Delaney and all her stupid, silly lies about how I wasn't a mistake, how I didn't deserve what my dad did to me. What a joke. I shook my head in disgust. But if it was a joke, it was easily the least funny one I had ever heard.

And what had she meant when she called Toothless 'Caden'? What had she said about him? "Because he's the stubborn boy who never slowed down, no matter how much other people told him to." What had she meant by that? And why couldn't anyone just answer my questions for once, instead of me having to answer theirs? Even when I told them I didn't want to talk, I ended up telling them all sorts of things anyway, things I never intended to tell them.

And most importantly, what was going on with my dad? Why would nobody but Ms. Delaney tell me anything about him? And even then, all I got was the bare minimum, nothing real, no substance. Why were they doing this? Did they think I couldn't handle it?

I just had to pray that Dad would stay safe and under the radar until I could get out of here, get back to him. I will be the perfect son, just so long as he's okay.

I rolled over, tugging the blanket closer to me and closed my eyes, quietly repeating a lullaby my mother had taught me, quietly singing myself to sleep.

* * *

><p>I didn't know what I was drawing " nobody could tell the real shape of it yet. It was, for the moment, merely random, interconnected lines crisscrossing over all the pages, sometimes making shapes, giving me ideas, sometimes not. But the actual meaning of the drawing was lost " it was merely an aimless work that I had no intention of ever showing to anyone, except maybe Ms. Delaney. I mean, she was the art teacher after all. This was her class. She'd probably need proof that we'd done the assignment.

I was just drawing. Everything was calm. I could hear pencils scratching on paper from other students, other desks beside and around me, like a fence blocking me in. I think I might have been crying, but I couldn't tell. I wasn't sure of anything anymore,

except that the page was blurring in front of my eyes, all my neat little lines fading into one, complete blob of gray. I didn't know if Ms. Delaney would understand this drawing, the way she had all the last ones. Ms. Delaney always instinctively understood everything._

_Yes, I was crying, I realized when I reached up to touch my face. My fingers were wet with the moisture from my tears, still dripping lightly off my face and onto the drawing I'd done. It wasn't really finished, the drawing wasn't, but I stopped working on it and focused on crying instead. I'd always been good at quiet crying so it wouldn't surprise me if no one heard me but Ms. Delaney did " I know she did. She looked up from her desk, looked right at me. I know she did. I felt her gaze on mine. I hastily tried to wipe away the tears, because the last thing I needed right then was for her to start questioning everything again. I swallowed, bracing myself for the moment when she'd announce that class was dismissed, that she needed to speak to me privately. I didn't want to answer any questions. I fidgeted nervously with my sleeve to prolong the moment, staring very hard at my wrist " and I nearly gasped in shock at what I found. _

_My skin, once pale and freckled, was completely black and blue. Bruises littered every available inch of skin. Was this the result of my father's latest beating? It should hurt more. I pushed my sleeves up a little farther, allowing myself to explore the contusions a little more extensively. They were everywhere, going up and down both arms, shoulders, hands I'd bet that if I pushed up my shirt, I'd find bruises on my stomach and sides and back, too. And then I remembered that Ms. Delaney had been about to dismiss class, the bell was about to ring, people were about to look up people were about to see. _

I yanked the sleeves down as far as they would go, biting my lip so hard I tasted blood. Hesitantly, I lifted my gaze. Ms. Delaney was still looking at me. Her face was completely expressionless. But I knew she'd seen. "It's not what you think!" I called frantically, jumping up from my seat, determined to make her listen, to make her see. "Ms. Delaney" I stopped, looked around. Nobody had registered my words. The other students kept drawing. Ms. Delaney dropped her gaze back to her desk and sighed.

"_Ms. Delaney?" I repeated uncertainly. _

She gave no response.

I put one bruised hand on her desk. "Ms. Delaney?"

She did not even look up.

"_Ms. Delaney" _

"_Class dismissed." She lifted her eyes to look around the room at large, giving a little sigh as she glanced at the clock. "Off you go, then." She wasn't her usual bubbly, cheerful self. Even I, who'd never claimed to know a fraction of anything about her, recognized this._

"_Ms. Delaney?" I repeated, trying to be firm, yet my voice betrayed my uncertainty " it shook and wobbled horribly. "What's

wrong?"_

_She didn't even give an indication that I had spoken â€" her face remained completely impassive as she watched her students exit the classroom. _

"_Astrid!" Thank God! I'd caught sight of her blond braid in the crowd. Maybe she could explain some of this craziness. "Astridâ€|" I fought my way through the stampede of students to get to her, but she was walking with Ruffnut._

"_Some test, huh?" The other girl twirled a strand of hair around her index finger thoughtfully. _

"_The one in history, you mean?" Astrid responded. "I thought I was going to die."_

Silence fell for a few seconds, so I took my chance. I tapped her on the shoulder lightly, but as firmly as I could, so she couldn't ignore me as Ms. Delaney had. "Astrid, do you know what's going on with Ms. Delaney?"

"_I'm definitely going to fail," Ruffnut continued gloomily, completely ignoring me._

"_Astrid?"_

"_Promise me you'll stay in touch if I have to go to summer school?" Ruffnut joked. _

"_I don't see why we need to know history anyway."_

"_Or Spanish," Ruffnut nodded._

"_Astrid?" I stepped in front of her, blocking her path. Yes, I knew it was rude. But I wanted some answers!_

"_Well, foreign languages are important," Astrid conceded. When she reached me, she did something strange â€" her eyes locked on mine â€" I knew they did. I saw them. Her pretty blue met mine, and then she justâ€|she justâ€|she just walked right through me. I mean, not by me. She didn't swerve around me. She didn't bump into me as she passed. She literally walked right through me. _

I couldn't even fathom what this meant. Why had sheâ€|?

"_Ruffnut!" _

She didn't give an answer.

"_Snotlout!" I yelled, spying his brawn in the tide. I would have been happy had he even taken notice of me, but no â€" he continued shouldering his way through the crowd, as before. "Snotlout? Astrid? Ruffnut? Ruffnut? Guys!" _

But not a one of them turned.

_It hit me then, though it had been building for quite a few minutes now â€" I was invisible. They couldn't see me. They couldn't hear me.

I was the invisible, perfect overachiever I had always wanted to be._

I woke up with tears on my lashes, sure I was fading away.

48. Visible

****Chapter 48: Visible ****

****A/N:** Happy birthday to PenelopePeace14! It's a little late, but I thought it'd be better if I took some time to think about what direction I wanted it to go beforehand instead of just blindly churning it out. Okay. So, I also saw the first seven episodes of Race to the Edge and xD xD xD Episode seven is my favorite so far. Haven't seen anymore, haven't had time, but that should change soon. I'll settle down and watch 'em all in a mad blitz. I seriously considered cutting the letter 'S' out of my vocabulary for a long time after watching it xD TOOTHLE. PLAMA BLAT. xD xD xD Anyway, I got a new plant, too :D It's like a tree? It's tropical foliage, but it's in a pot. And I need a name for it, because it doesn't remind me of Jack Frost. Maybe Hiccup? But meh. Oh, you know, I should name it Toothless. But I don't want to be responsible for killing Toothless. Oh, maybe I'll name it Stoick, because he's already dead in canon xD but would that be an omen, to name my plant after a dead fictional character? Meh, well. Speaking of which, please no spoilers about Race to the Edge, episode 8 and onward. I hope PenelopePeace14 has a great birthday, and I hope everyone enjoys the chapter. ******

* * *

><p>I am invisible.

From the instant that the thought entered my head, I knew without question that it was absolutely true, and it terrified me more than I ever wanted to admit. Of course, I knew it was stupid to be scared in the first place. It was just a dream, and a rather silly one at that. Of course I wasn't invisible. That's what I tried to tell myself, anyway. I wasn't invisible. People didn't walk right through me. People didn't look right through me. They saw me.

Orâ€|did they?

I didn't fall asleep again for a long time after that.

I wasn't sure what to think when the blond nurse announced visitors the next morning, and Toothless and the girls entered, all three of them looking rather tense and quiet. I watched them slowly take their seats, Astrid carefully setting her book bag down on the floor by her feet, like she was afraid the shadows on the walls were going to jump out and grab it from her if she dared take her hands off the strap. Ruffnut just looked very sad and morose, but Toothlessâ€|Toothless was the most concerning of all. The hours spent away from me had not improved his appearance in the slightest â€" if anything, he looked still worse.

Deep purple bags stood out prominently against the dark skin under his eyes, his normally glossy black hair looking almost dusty, as if he hadn't brushed it or even thought about it for a very long time. Even something in his eyes was different â€" ordinarily, they

sparkled and gleamed and shone with life and exuberance, but now, they were lifeless. His lips were pulled into a seemingly permanent frown, like he had forgotten how to smile, and his whole body sagged to one side, like his very bones were tired, simply from holding him up. He sat stiffly in his seat, picking absently at a loose string on his hoodie, sneaking glances up at me once or twice.

"Hi?" I ventured carefully. I directed the greeting more at him than anybody else, hoping a bit of conversation would draw him out, get him looking more alive again. Judging by those eyes, though, what he really needed was not talk, but rest.

"Hi, Hiccup." Ruffnut was the first to speak, but Astrid quickly followed suit.

"Good morning," the other girl said quickly.

"Hi." Toothless' voice sounded quiet and rusty, like a hinge that hadn't been used for a long time. His voice never sounded like that. From what I knew, Toothless was talkative as hell.

Ms. Delaney's words flashed once again in my mind. I wondered if the boy at my bedside knew that I had so nearly discovered his secrets the previous day. If he knew that I now knew his real name. Caden. I repeated it to myself, determined not to forget it. I met his tired gaze slowly, trying to decide if I had the courage to question him. But he was exhausted, and though I was curious, I didn't think it fair to just spring it on him all because I wanted some answers. I could wait a couple days to start questioning him. "What are you guys doing here so early?"

"Visiting," Astrid replied, like it was obvious.

"No, I know that," I rolled my eyes, "but don't you three have to be at school or something?"

"You don't have a calendar in here?" Ruffnut looked very surprised. "Hiccup, it's Saturday."

"Is it?" I asked, genuinely surprised. Sinking slowly back down onto my pillows, I glanced around the hospital room for a minute or two, trying to find something else to talk about. "How is school, anyway?"

"Unreal," Astrid responded, brushing her stray hairs back behind her ears. They caught the sunlight, glinting momentarily gold before falling back against her skin again.

"It's kind of weird," Ruffnut admitted. "I mean, everyone's talking about yâ€"

Astrid kicked her.

While Ruffnut yelped in pain and rubbed at her shin, I raised my eyebrows, looking between the three of them. "About me?" I guessed softly.

"No," Astrid was quick to tell me. "No, of course not. They're talking aboutâ€|umâ€|"

"Astrid." Her name caught her attention and when she looked at me, I forced myself to smile. "It's okay." It wasn't. It wasn't okay. It was so not okay, and I hated that everyone was talking about me, but she looked upset and she was trying to make things better for me, and I really didn't want her to worry about me. People shouldn't worry about me.

"Okay." Her response was soft.

"Really, it'sâ€"does he do that often?" My gaze traveled over to Toothless, who was half-asleep in his chair, elbow on the armrest, practically falling out of the seat entirely.

"On and off." Astrid seemed to find this perfectly normal. "Let him sleep, Hiccup â€" I don't think he even blinked once for hours after he heard about what happened to you."

"Really?" The way they talked about him â€" Ms. Delaney and now Astrid â€" they seemed to feel that he was really worried about me, which was so weird. I was just some random kid who'd hit him in the shoulder with a backpack. And it was himself he should be worried about, anyway. Had he even looked in a mirror since he'd visited me last?

"We were all scared," Ruffnut told me quietly. "We had no idea what had happened â€" the only news we got was that you were in critical condition. For awhile, not even family could see you."

"Not that that would have mattered."

"Nah, Toothless tried to pass off as your brother," Astrid gave an odd half smile, glancing over at the boy sleeping in the chair next to her. She gently reached out and wiped a lock of glossy hair out of his face. He stirred slightly, wrinkling his nose as the strand tickled his skin.

"I take it that didn't fly."

Ruffnut grinned. "Well, then he realized you guys weren't even the same skin color, that he was only half-white and you're completely white, so he tried half brother and he was still sent back to his seat."

"Ouch," I glanced over at the sleeping boy, finding a smile forcing my lips upward. I couldn't believe Toothless had tried so hard and worried so muchâ€"for me. I had never, ever felt more visible.

49. Sorry

****Chapter 49: Sorry ****

****A/N: Two thousand words! Huh?****

****Oh, oh, also, I've come to a definite conclusion: this story is going to be more than fifty-two chapters, at least. I don't know exactly where it's going and how it's going to end, but it should end semi-hopefully? Maybe? If I do what I want with it, it'll be sixty to seventy chapters. But I don't know if I'm going to do that. Generally, I do whatever seems right for the fic, whatever fits and**

feels right. I just really want to get this story perfect, and if it needs less than sixty chapters, I'll do less than sixty. And if it needs more than that, I'll do more than that. And, really, thank you guys so much for all these wonderful reviews. I feel like I don't thank you guys enough, and I never have, but you guys' reviews do mean a lot to me. I still do feel sometimes like I'm a bad writer, and seeing what you guys say to me really helps me not feel that way. From the bottom of my heart, guys, thank you. (I would do a heart here, except Fanfiction does not allow angle brackets -.-) **

**Oh, oh, BTW, my tropical foliage is dead. I kind of saw it coming, though. It's been looking rather brown and dry these past few days, and it probably needs food, but basically I killed it before I even decided on a name. I'm horrible. I really should have just named it Stoick, huh? Or Drago. Maybe next time, I'll get a pretty plant and name it Eret because Eret's number-one talent was being pretty xD like, I liked him, too. He was an awesome character, but mostly he just stood around and looked pretty and fended off Ruffnut. Essentially. I love the idea that Ruffnut gets over Eret though, just kinda gives up on him and then he starts liking her xD that'd be hilarious, I think. Or maybe my warped sense of humor is finally showing. **

**One more thing: Sorry about all the swearing in this chapter. I imagine once Stoick got going on Hiccup, he went all out, pretty much. I didn't use the F word, because personally I don't like it, but Stoick probably used that one on him, too. **

* * *

><p>I'd been answering a lot of questions lately, and these were quite possibly the last ones I wanted to answer. But with Toothless passed out in the chair at my bedside, sleeping so deeply he barely even stirred, there was nobody to intervene this time, to say I didn't have to answer that if I didn't want to, to tell me I didn't have to talk.<p>

And somewhere in the back of my mind, I registered that I didn't. I didn't have to talk. I could tell them no, say I didn't feel like talking about it right now " which was perfectly true. I'd told Astrid no just yesterday, and though it felt like an eternity ago, it hadn't even been forty-eight hours. But between the conversations with Ms. Delaney and Heather, and the sleepless night, and the conversations with myself, I found I just didn't have the strength to deny them any longer. So when Ruffnut's first question came, I just let it come, laying back on the bed, letting the words wash over me like summer rain.

"Can I just"|"can I just"|"ask you something? Do you care?"

I shrugged. When I'd made the decision to die, I'd hardly cared at all, and suddenly I cared too much. It made me wonder if that meant I was screwed up. Mainly, I just wished I was dead, though I was also grateful to Toothless and everyone else for pretending they cared so much. I should have given them a better thank you before I tried to off myself.

When Ruffnut remained silent, I realized she hadn't noticed my wordless response, so I pulled myself into a sitting position and shrugged again. "Sure. Whatever. Go ahead." I figured whatever she

wanted to ask me couldn't be much worse than everything that Ms. Lydia had asked me, everything that Heather had asked me.

"Why?" She wouldn't look at me. She kept her pretty gray eyes fixed on the hospital floor, tugging nervously at her braids, deft fingers running over the silky, soft blond locks again and again. Her hands stilled upon reaching the thin elastic bands keeping the hair in place, but she didn't remove them " she slowly dropped her hands into her lap again, but she still wouldn't look at me. "Why did you do it?" Her voice quivered when she talked, and I understood it was a hard question for her to ask. And if it was so hard to ask, did she think it would be easy to answer?

Yet there were so many answers I could give.

The easiest, simplest, most truthful answer was the only one I didn't want to give: I needed to die. I was a mistake. A train wreck. A freak. I was doing everyone a favor by offing myself, because it would have happened sooner or later. I would have decided it was too much sooner or later, because I was weak and couldn't take it, and it didn't matter how close I was to finishing the race, I never would have made it all the way. Or my dad would finally have decided I was too much trouble, and kicked me out for good, or just done away with me himself. By his fists, I would have lain there, broken and gasping, knowing without question that I was going to die. At least my way, I would have been going out on my own terms.

But there were other answers, too, ones I also couldn't give.

My father " my own father, the man who was supposed to look after me, and might have, had I not been such a horrible son " my own father was beating me nearly every day and maybe I deserved it, hell, I knew I did, but that was my dad telling me I was a shitty son and a little bitch and a goddamn liar as his fists tore into my skin, leaving huge bruises and scars that didn't show. That was my dad, the man who'd once pressed my hand to a stove eye, leaving a shiny pink burn for the next few weeks, and that was my dad who'd told me I was a mistake and why the hell didn't he just leave me out on the streets because I was such a stupid shit that that was all I deserved. I remembered spending hours crying in my bedroom, the door locked in the fear that he might come back. I remembered waking up the next morning, barely able to move because of how badly I hurt. And I knew, even then, that I'd deserved it, because if I didn't, why did he do it?

And another reason " who would actually give a shit when I was gone? The kids at school? The same ones that cornered me by the Dumpster every day and kicked the crap out of me and laughed like idiots when I struggled to get up? The kids who heard my gasps of pain and gave each other high-fives, and felt like they were on top every time they shoved me down? The kids who played basketball and went to ice cream shops on Friday nights and invited me out of pity? The kids who never looked at me, never saw me, and never said a word when they saw me getting kicked around like a football? The teachers? The ones who graded my papers with As and told me I was doing great and offered me entry into AP classes? The ones who told me, with a lot of hard work, I could get into college on scholarship? Those hundreds and hundreds of people who never even knew me at all?

And the Xs. And the not being able to eat, not being allowed to eat.

And the gnawing pain in my stomach, the lurching in my gut whenever I smelled food, because I had to go hours and days without food, and there were endless weeks where all I got were a few bites of a sandwich, just a cracker or two, and it was so hard to tell myself to stop, because all I wanted was to eat and eat until I felt full, only I couldn't because I didn't deserve it and if I was just good enough, if I just skipped enough meals, Dad would finally love me again, finally hug me and stop cussing me out and stop coming home drunk and stop yelling and beating me, and he would finally do the shopping again, finally kiss me, and finally touch me again, not with the intent to harm, but with the intent to help.

And the pressure. I had to get straight As, because anything below, and I would spend the weekend curled up on my bed, arms wrapped around my stomach to try and silence the growling, the constant begging for food. And I had to do well in school, and I had to keep a smile on my face, and I couldn't cry or show emotion because I was fine, I was Hiccup the overachiever and everybody knows if you get perfect grades, you get a perfect life, right? Perfect parents, perfect smile, perfect life, perfect grades, perfect little act. And even when you don't eat because your grades were perfect, but not good enough, and even when you show up at school on Monday with a bruise on your cheek, you're still living a perfect life, and you just walked into a door.

And—and Mom. I blinked and swallowed as sudden tears sprang to my eyes. I'd wanted to die because I thought I might get to see Mom again. I'd hoped. If I'd seen her, I'd finally get the chance to tell her that I was so sorry, that I never meant to be a mistake, and I never meant to think of her when I looked at Ms. Delaney, and it wasn't replacing her, it was just that she looked like Ms. Delaney and she was nice like Ms. Delaney. And I wanted to say I was sorry that I'd never been a good son, that I'd come crying after school because I was too weak and stupid to deal with some kids pushing me around. And I wanted to say I was sorry that she'd gone away, because it was my fault, only she might not have been so sad when she died, because then she wouldn't have had to see my face anymore. I could have dealt with her hating me like Dad did, just so long as she knew I was so sorry.

I wiped at my eyes. I knew my lips were shaking, I knew I was probably shaking all over, because thinking of Mom always made me cry, and just hearing her name made me break down, because I wasn't really allowed to think of her, because I didn't deserve to, after I'd killed her.

And Ruffnut still wanted an answer, still sat there waiting. How long had I been silent? I hoped it hadn't been long. I struggled to form a response. I knew my voice was going to come out kind of weak and croaky, though. It always did when I was trying my hardest not to cry.

"I don't know."

She blinked, looking a little surprised. I noticed she exchanged looks with Astrid before I spoke again.

"Everything. Nothing. I don't know." I thought about the drawing I'd entered in the art competition. I wondered if Ms. Delaney had known from the instant she'd seen it that it was what I was dying

for.

"Hiccupâ€|?" Ruffnut's hand found mine suddenly, reminding me of Heather, and the way she'd touched me last night. Ruffnut's hands felt different from Heather's. Not softer or better or rougher or worse, just different.

"I don't know." I repeated the words mechanically, only did it really matter anymore if I told them everything? But I didn't want to tell them about Dad. This was my burden to bear, and I should bear it alone. Mistakes didn't deserve friends.

So I just repeated it, feeling the tears building, knowing they were going to come coursing down my face at any second, and wishing madly that they'd just leave. "_I don't know_. I don't. I don't know."

* * *

><p>Hospital food.<p>

As a general rule, it's not exactly to die for. I noted darkly that I'd been using death as an analogy a lot these days. I guess it was because all I wanted was to be dead.

I'd heard horror stories about hospital food, but I hadn't actually eaten any. For the last few days, they'd been feeding me through an IV tube, so I hadn't really had to think about food. I'd been thinking about it, obviously, because the now-constant hunger was always in the back of my mind. My body registered the hunger, but as I wasn't allowed to eat, I tried not to let myself dwell on it.

And nowâ€|

I swallowed, feeling my stomach beginning to churn, unable to take my eyes off the food on the tray. Food, real food, I could see it now, food, so much, I hadn't eaten in so long andâ€|andâ€|oh, god, they were going to make me eat it and I didn't deserve it and no, they couldn't make me eat, no, I would never eat it, I didn't care what it was, I'd die before I ate it, no, I didn't deserve it, _no_â€|

I pressed myself back against the pillows, as if I thought keeping a physical distance between me and the food would protect me from it. The crisp white paper covering the pillow crinkled when I leaned against it, and I felt it by my left ear, but I didn't look back, because I couldn't. I couldn't stop staring at the food, even as she eased it down into my lap.

When she pressed the clear plastic fork into my hand, I felt her hesitation. She didn't want to leave me alone with it, because a fork had sharp tines. I didn't want the fork, anyway. Forks were used for eating, and I didn't deserve to eat, so I just wanted to give it back, only she was already moving toward the door, getting ready to deliver more food, so I just waited until she left and set the fork down again, shoving it into the gravy on the tray, trying to ignore how badly I wanted it. I couldn't have it, so I might as well stop thinking about it, stop wasting time crying about it. I pushed it farther down, so it wasn't sitting on my lap anymore, because the closer it was, the harder it was to resist. The stronger the smell, the stronger the desire.

I closed my eyes. I did not deserve it. _I did not._

That was one of the longest hours of my life, sitting there, trying my hardest not to eat.

And when the nurse came back, lifting the tray off my lap, it was still full, the food upon it, the horrible, tempting food, was still untouched. The first thing she did was pull the fork out of the gravy, making sure it was there. Because I couldn't be trusted around sharp things anymore, because I was the freak who'd tried to kill myself. I'd never once tried hurting myself. I swallowed.

"You didn't eat." Her voice was quiet, but not like the blonde nurse's; this woman's voice was deeper, steadier. Less airy, less high.

"I wasn't hungry." I gritted my teeth against the lie the instant it left my lips.

"Still not?"

"Nope."

"Why don't you take a few bites anyway?" She set the tray back down on my legs, but I pushed it away immediately.

"No, I don't want to, I'm not hungry."

"Why not justâ€"

"_You can't make me eat_!"

There was a second of ringing silence as I realized how loud my voice had gotten and now I wanted to apologize because I didn't mean to talk that loudly or rudely or forcefully, but at the same time, the sight of the hated tray stiffened my resolve. She was trying to make me eat, so she didn't deserve my apology.

She remained by my bedside. "Five bites, please. Minimum."

50. Smile

****Chapter 50: Smile ****

****A/N: Okay, to HiccupHaddockIII - this is your birthday chapter, and oh my god. I am so sorry. I promised you a chapter back in August. I am horrible. I feel really terrible, bro, I am sorry, I meant to update, but I got caught up in everything else and I wanted to make sure the chapter flowed nicely and was a good chapter and moved the plot and came with Hiccup feels and whatnot, I AM SO SORRY, I AM SHIT I KNOW I AM SORRY PLEASE ACCEPT THIS ANYWAY *cries* ****

****Um, to the rest of you guys...I'm sorry? For taking forever to update and whatnot? I just...I really want this fanfiction to be nice, to be perfect, and I'm worried it won't be. So I take a lot of time making sure it is. Thank you guys for sticking with it.****

*** * ***

><p>No. Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no! Why is she asking me this? Why is she doing this? I can't eat, I don't deserve to eat, no, I can't eat, I can't, I can'tâ€|how am I going to get out of this? If there is any mercy in this world for mistakes, please make her change her mind.

As I struggled to quell the rising panic, I registered something akin to discomfort in my left hand. No. Not discomfort. Pain. It cleared my head, at least, and I looked over to see the sharp tines of the plastic fork the nurse had given me were digging into the pale white skin of my fist.

I readjusted my grip, intensely aware that every move of mine was being watched here, calculated and discussed and analyzed. Like I was some kind of effing _lab rat_.

I drew in a deep breath, returning my gaze to the food. My stomach ached with how much I wanted to eat it.

_Butâ€|five bites? That's excessive. Way excessive. Too much for me. I've made too many mistakes to deserve five bites. _

I made too many mistakes to even deserve _one_, I thought ruefully to myself, eyeing the food longingly.

No. I couldn't do this. I pushed the tray away, down toward the bottom of the bed. "I'm really not hungry. I don't want anything."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

My stomach hurt with how badly I wanted to eat everything on the tray, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. I wouldn't let myself. That much I knew. I stayed silent for a second.

_Please, don't make me eatâ€|pleaseâ€|she doesn't understand it, but I can't. Please, please, please, get me out of this. I don't deserve itâ€|I'm a mistakeâ€|I should just quit eating, and if I eat any of this, it'll just come back up anyway, because five bites is more than I've been able to eat, more than I've been allowed to eat, for something like five days, so please, please, don't make me eat, I don't deserve itâ€| _

Maybe if I took one bite, she'd leaveâ€|

My hand shook as I slowly pulled the tray closer to me again, up onto my lap. It was hard to cut the chicken with trembling fingers.

_Just one? _

Just one, I promised myself resolutely, finally managing to isolate one chunk of chicken from the rest â€" a task made harder with the piece-of-crap fork they expected me to work with.

_Oh, no, that bite's way too bigâ€|please don't eat all that, Hiccupâ€|Dad will kill you if you do. _

Wasn't planning on it. I cut the chicken in half again, making the bite I'd broken off smaller this time.

Oh, no, that's still too much.

Didn't I know it. I grimly cut it again, watching it split into little pieces again.

_No, Iâ€¦I don't deserve all that. That's too much, for the kid who failed to kill himself. _

I tightened my lips, and cut it again â€" then immediately moved to repeat the action, as I knew just from looking at it that the bite was still too big for me to eat, but it was as small as it could go now. It wouldn't cut again.

I had to eat it now.

Panic rose within me.

Hesitantly, I stabbed at it with my fork, then lifted it to my mouth, transferring the piece from the tines to my tongue, a small whimper escaping me at the taste. I didn't care that it came from a hospital, or that it had long since gone cold, or that I didn't deserve to eat it; right then, it was the best damn chicken I had ever tasted.

I swallowed it quickly, determined not to let myself enjoy it any more than I deserved. Guilt engulfed me the instant the chicken went down. I glanced one more time at the tray â€" don't deserve it, don't deserve it, Dad will kill me, don't deserve it â€" before turning back to look at the nurse. "There. I took a bite. Can I stop now?"

"I believe I explained this to you before." But she didn't sound impatient. And she didn't sound at all like she was about to hit me. But I knew if I ate this food, somebody would. "It's mandatory for all our patients to eat at least a few bites at every meal."

"I'mâ€¦really not hungry." My stomach hurt from how hungry I was. It ached with the physical hope for more food.

"C'mon, another bite." It came out sounding like a bargain.

A small, slightly hysterical laugh tickled the back of my throat as it threatened to spill out into the air. So was that how they treated all their patients here? Like prisoners with the illusion of satisfaction, the illusion of choice?

It wasn't a matter of asking; not even a matter of bargaining.

It was that I _couldn't_.

"Why don't you just take one more bite?" She extended her hand, and it hovered in midair for a second, like she was on the verge of placing it on my shoulder.

Or hitting me.

My stomach burned from the food I had just swallowed. Even my body knew I didn't deserve the food I'd just eaten.

"If you don't begin eatingâ€¦" There was no threat in her voice; only

calm, controlled words. This act was rehearsed. I wondered how many other kids she had to talk into eating every day. "I'm going to have to call in somebody who will assure that you do."

My stomach tightened. Somebody who would assure that I did? What did that mean? They couldn't force me to eat here, could they? This was still_ America_. Prisoner or not, I had my rights here.

If somebody else fed me, thenâ€¦I'd have no way to fake eating, pretend I was feeding my body when the only things I was feeding were my napkin and the garbage can. They would make me eat. They wouldn't give me a choice or a tray or pretty words. They'd make me.

My breathing hitched.

I picked up the fork again.

Half.

Fourths.

Eighths.

* * *

><p>Toothless knew.<p>

I could tell just by looking at him; the instant he came in the door, I knew. Why else would he be avoiding my gaze like that? Why else would he keep staring at the floor, as if thinking his eyes could burn a hole in the speckled white tile?

"Hi," I said cautiously. If he knew what a screw-up and mistake I was, why was he coming here to visit me? He wasn't stupid. He knew I didn't deserve friends. So why was he giving me his company?

"Hey," he mumbled uncomfortably, jamming his hands in his pockets.

I looked at the door again, expecting the girls to come traipsing in after him. It seemed odd to see him without them in the immediate vicinity. The three of them just seemed to belong together. "Are Astrid and Ruffnut coming?" I inwardly winced the instant the words left my lips. Way to make him feel like his company wasn't good enough.

"No," he replied quietly. "They, umâ€¦they don't know I'm here."

"Oh. Okay." I swallowed, looking back down at the hospital blanket. Why had he come here if he didn't want to talk? I wondered, feeling a little annoyed. And why had he come alone? Not that I wasn't happy about that â€" the girls could be a little overwhelming sometimes, with all their questions and affection. Especially Ruffnut.

"Did you get any sleep yesterday?"

"Huh?" He glanced up at me then, in obvious surprise, and this answered my question. He still looked absolutely exhausted.

"It was justâ€¦you were so tiredâ€¦"

"Oh. That." He waved a hand dismissively, sinking down into the plastic orange chair by my bedside. "Nah. Didn't sleep much."

"Why?" The word fell from my mouth before I could stop it, and I bit my lip nervously. For all I knew, his lack of rest was for personal reasons.

"You're the one in the hospital bed," he pointed out. "I should be worrying about you." He offered a small, tired smile. It didn't escape my notice that he didn't answer my question. "Anyway, umâ€¦" his expression became closed again as he looked back down at the floor. He had brushed his hair back, out of his eyes, but now it fell freely forward again, and I lost sight of his face once again. "H-Hiccupâ€¦I, uhâ€¦Iâ€¦"

For a minute, I was speechless. Was Toothless _stuttering_? I had never known the â€" well â€" the slightly arrogant kid in front of me to ever show uncertainty in this manner before. I blinked up at him in complete confusion and a bit of shock, waiting for him to finish his sentence.

"I, uhâ€¦Iâ€¦" He leaned down toward his backpack, and I heard a zipper. "Iâ€¦wellâ€¦" What came out next was something so garbled, spoken so fast, that I assumed he was attempting to master speech at the speed of light. All I caught from the whole thing was 'brought' 'time' 'girls' and 'hope'. And then he handed me a book.

I disregarded this. "_What_"

He opened his mouth.

I held up a hand. "At a normal speed, please?"

"Alright." He nodded. "Iâ€¦uhâ€¦I brought youâ€¦that." He pointed to the book. "I mean, I bought it. It's yours. I overheard you talking to the girls as they were leavingâ€¦aboutâ€¦you made a joke about being so bored you thought you were going to try and escape or somethingâ€¦so Iâ€¦I bought you that, just toâ€¦to, you know, help pass the time." He looked anywhere but at me as he said that.

At least I could hear and understand the words this time, but I still didn't comprehend them. "What?" I repeated, uncertainly, as I glanced down at the paperback in my hand. A Lois Duncan book. The day at the lunch table, Toothless had seen me reading Lois Duncan.

"Look, I said it twice, how slowly do you need me toâ€¦"

"Youâ€¦youâ€¦thisâ€¦I meanâ€¦" Had he really bought it for _me_? No. Of course not. That was ridiculous. He was probably kidding. Of course he was.

He studied me curiously for a minute, tilting his head like he was trying to understand my thought process.

"What?"

"Iâ€¦justâ€¦Iâ€¦it'sâ€¦it'sâ€¦" I held the book out to him, willing him to just take it and make things easier on both of us. His pity had come to an end. He'd seen what a mistake I was, and now he was

going to leave me.

"Hiccup, it's for you." He lightly batted my hand away.

Of all the things I had expected, I had not thought he would choose to keep the joke going. "No, Toothless, Iâ€

"Is there a problem with it?"

"No!" If it really was supposed to be mine â€" and I had trouble swallowing this idea â€" then I didn't want him to think I was rejecting it. "Iâ€|justâ€|it'sâ€|it'sâ€|" He seemed completely sincere. Was he actually telling the truth? Did he actually mean for it to be mine?

No, of course not. I shook my head firmly against the thoughts. I was Hiccup the Useless. I was a mistake. And mistakes did not deserve nice things.

"Hiccup?"

"Toothless, I don'tâ€|I can'tâ€|I can't take this, I meanâ€|I mean, thank you, but I don'tâ€|" I extended my hand to give it back again.

"It's a thank-you, then," he said firmly, pushing the book back at me. "For making it three-on-one in the gym that day."

Unexpectedly, he smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile, too, momentarily tightening my fingers around the book.

51. Friend

****Chapter 51: Friend ****

****A/N:** Alright, so, firstly, this is dedicated to EmpressRulerofallthat is weird, who asked for a birthday chapter, but she never really specified the date, so I figured any day would work. It'll probably happen if others don't give me exact dates, too; if I don't have a deadline, I blow it off. Actually that's not really true, because I blow it off even with a deadline. ******

****Um.** Anyway. I should probably apologize for waiting so long to update this fic, and because this chapter is the, how shall we say it...the calm before the storm? So, I'm sorry, I guess. I probably sound really stiff right now, but I'm just not feeling too great. I'm feeling a little down, and I think I caught a bug - I feel like I have a cold, and my temperature's been higher-than-normal lately, but it's nothing so horrible that it's kept me in bed or inside the house or anything, so I'm sure it's nothing. ******

****Anyway,** this AN isn't too long, though, and I'm not happy with it, so I'm gonna try and think of something to add to it...******

****OH, YEAH,** so you know how I said in that one AN - chapter 46, I want to say? - how I didn't put the F word in there because I didn't really like using it? Well, I don't believe I've ever said that word, at least not within earshot of anybody else; occasionally, it will slip out, but that's normally when I'm listening to a song that has

it in there, and I'm just running on autopilot and singing along. WELL. The other day, I was playing a video game with my friends, and the thing is, there's this gold coin you're supposed to get, this huge golden coin, and it was a really hard level that we were playing, and it had taken us, I don't know, probably two days of hard playing to even snag the coin at all, and we finally managed it - not only did we manage it, but we managed it without dying or anything, so we were all celebrating...but we started in a little too early. Because - we were all aware of this, so it was our own damn faults - the bricks you're supposed to stand on in the level have this cute little habit of giving out from under you, and sending you plummeting down a hole into your death; so while we're being all self-congratulatory, what happens? The bricks do exactly that. They just give out from beneath us. My friends made little noises of disappointment, but apparently, my offense was so great that I actually screamed, "FUCK!" And then I wondered, as my friends snorted like hyenas, whether I had really said that or not. So. Yeah. That is .ryder's misadventure for the day. Well, technically, this occurred like two weeks ago, but still. It counts. **

* * *

><p>"So." Toothless jerked me out of my thoughts, flicking a piece of dark hair out of his eyes and sinking down into his chair, evidently feeling more at ease now that he had done what he'd come here for and given me the book. I still found it hard to believe that he'd gotten so nervous and worked up over the tiny little paperback, and the gifting of it. "How's it going here?"<p>

_Well, I tried to kill myself not a week ago. _The words entered my head, but never left my lips. I couldn't bring myself to say them; everyone else just seemed so upset when I talked about it that I automatically assumed Toothless would be, too. "It's okay. You guys and a couple other people have visited me a lot, when I'm not sleeping and everything." _Or getting checked on to make sure I haven't attempted a round two on myself._ I gave a little grimace, before holding the book up. "But thanks. For this. I was joking when I said that to the girls, but this will help pass the time." I glanced briefly at the cover again - a blurry picture of a broken-down school bus was the only hint as to what happened amid the pages.

"Um, I can get you more," he offered. "I mean, are there any you wanted to read or something?"

I flushed. "Oh, Toothless, no, don't do that. Really. You don't have to do anything for me. Alright? This - this was enough."

He shrugged uncomfortably, settling down in the chair again. There was nothing to account for the slightly embarrassed look on his face, but it was there all the same.

Just when I thought he was either going to rise and bolt from the room, or start asking me the same kinds of questions that Heather and the girls and Ms. Delaney had, he looked up thoughtfully and said, "Do you listen to music?"

"If you come back tomorrow morning with an armload of CDs or something -"

"God, Hiccup, what time period are you living in? Nobody listens to CDs anymore. You sound like a caveman."

"CDs weren't even around when cavemen were."

"Well, have you ever actually been there?"

"Alright, look, the first CD player wasn't even invented untilâ€"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're a genius at everything, I know. Believe it or not, I gleaned this."

"Wh-what?" I felt myself blushing. "I'm not a genius. I'mâ€"you knowâ€"me." I gestured to myself with my hand â€" I had no idea where the sudden compliment was coming from, but I knew I was dumb as shit, because Snotlout never lost an opportunity to tell me.

Thankfully, Toothless let it go. "Anyway, no. I'm not planning on coming in with CDs or other such musical productions. I was only asking because I wanted to make conversation."

"Oh. Well. If we're still talking about that, then I haven't listened to any music sinceâ€|" _Since I became unlovable. _"Since I was ten. I don't even know what's popular anymore."

"Well, fourscore and seven years ago, regular people actually listened to CDsâ€|" "

"Toothlessâ€"

"And people also wrote their songs on stone tablets by firelightâ€"

"Stop being such aâ€"

"Oh, and also, finally, we got smart somewhere along the way and ended up creating I-pods and phones, which we can now listen to music on." As if to emphasize the point, he dug his pair of tangled white earphones out of his backpack; dangling from them was an electric blue I-pod.

He held it out, and I took it from him, examining it.

"It's so small. Aren't you afraid you'll lose it?"

"Nah, I normally keep it in my pocket when I listen to it."

"Huh. That makes sense."

Evidently feeling that he had officially educated me, Toothless tucked the I-pod back in his backpack. "Anyway, so that's what regular people listen to music with."

"Well," I folded my arms across my chest, "you, sir, should learn to respect your elders. What is the younger generation coming to?" I playfully quoted something I'd once heard Gobber say; at forty-eight, he'd once been the oldest person I'd known.

"You sound like my aunt." Toothless laughed, blowing a stray strand

of glossy dark hair out of his eyes and falling against the back of the chair.

"I don't see anything wrong with that," I told him, only half-joking now. "I met your aunt, remember? She's nice."

"Alright, alright, fine, I'll be nice. Will that make you feel any better?"

"I believe apologies are in order, young man."

"Fine. I'm sorry, _Grandpa_."

"You're forgiven, whippersnapper."

"You really _do_ sound like my aunt," he chuckled.

"I like your aunt," I muttered; suddenly embarrassed, I looked away. God, had I just been making a joke? What made me think I was funny?

"Yeah, because your meaningful conversation consisted of 'I need to leave' and 'Hiccup, let me drive you home'," Toothless was apparently not as self-conscious as I was over the unexpected playful air I'd adopted a few minutes previously, because he just kept right on talking. "I can see you two really got to know each other."

"I like anyone who drives me home, especially when it's raining," I replied.

"What? Walking home in the rain is the best."

"Sure, if you're in a bad movie."

"So it's just music you lack education on?" Toothless rested his cheek against his knuckles. "I mean, you're aware that movies now have color and sound?"

"Why are you being so rude? I'm sure your parents didn't raise you like this."

"You're talking like you're old enough to have raised my parents yourself."

"Whatever."

"See? See? That sounds like somebody your age."

I rolled my eyes, unwilling to get caught up in the joke again and end up making a complete fool of myself. "So, apparently, to talk like a teenager today, I just have to deliver weak comebacks?"

"Hey, that is the best and most universal comeback in the world. It's like saying 'F you' without getting sent to the principal's office for it."

"I'll bear that in mind," I responded sarcastically. "For the next time you use it on me."

"Oh, no, you're my friend," he replied earnestly. "I can talk however

I want with you."

"Wait, wait, what?"

"I can talk however I want with you? Right? Unless you don't like the word, in which case I guess I can replace it with 'screw', but that loses something"

"I mean you mean?" I was too embarrassed to ask for clarification, despite desperately wanting to know; did he really consider me a friend?

But Toothless appeared too confused by my stammering sentences to let it go. "Hiccup, I'm pretty sure words were around in cavemen times, so I'm sure you know how to use them."

"Never mind. It's nothing."

"Well, can I swear around you or not? I don't want to offend you."

"No. I mean yes. It's fine, you can swear around me I just..." I lost the thread of the sentence, looking away from him. I pulled my knees up to my chest. "It's nothing." _Of course he doesn't consider me a friend, really. Mistakes don't deserve friends. He just feels sorry for me._ Thoughts like these were comfortably familiar; I almost welcomed the guilt, the shame, the feelings of stupidity covering me like a heavy coat or a dark raincloud. For just a few minutes, I had forgotten that mistakes didn't smile or laugh, like a new shirt from a strange store, something unwelcome and alien against my skin. Slipping back into these thoughts was as easy as sliding a well-loved hoodie over my head.

The sound of Toothless' phone buzzing jerked me out of my thoughts; when I looked around at him, he was beginning to rise from the chair. "I've got to go; my aunt needs my help." He looked actually sincere when he faced me, not like he was lying to get away from me. "I'll come back tomorrow, though. Try and survive without me." He grinned, grabbing his backpack up and swinging it around over his shoulder. "'Bye!"

With that, he slipped out the door, and it swung shut behind him with a soft click; and only the walls heard my goodbye.

End
file.